

## SOPHIA SMALL

### *To Autumn Again*

#### Autumn

In a grey-walled classroom north of the Bridge I sit on a blue plastic chair and watch a class of seventeen-year-olds watching Jane Campion's *Bright Star*, about the poet John Keats.

Towards the end of the film, Paul Schneider, in character as Keats's friend Charles Brown, is arguing with Abbie Cornish's Fanny Brawne. In one of the film's most emotional moments he stands in the parlour with Brawne and screams, over and over, "I failed John Keats! I failed him!"

The class explodes. One girl laughs so hard she struggles to breathe, laughs so hard she grabs the table for balance. "Miss!" they shout. "Why is he doing that?"

It's strange, sometimes, the way kids respond to emotional moments.

Then again, I am the one crying, in a room full of teenagers, in the middle of a pandemic. But it has been seven months since I last saw John Keats.

I try to pretend I haven't been crying, try to pass off my crying as laughing. He's not supposed to be here, in this classroom, where I am not a daughter but a teacher of other people's daughters. He's not supposed to be here, in this story. But that's the problem with stories. The ending is never where you think.

Beginnings are easier: it starts at the hospital, where most of us start and most of us will end.

I am sitting on the low wall outside the RPA hospital in Newtown when Dad calls from London.

After months of tests and scans and scans and tests, a letter in his mailbox spelled out what no one said but we all guessed they were testing for: *no signs of cancer*. But it is midnight in London when my phone rings in Sydney and I think I know what he is going to say before he says it.

"There's been a bit of a mix up, swee-har," he says in his South London clip. "They made a mistake."

Someone else's results. Someone else's relief. A bit of a mix up. They made a mistake. That night I dream of some other dad, some other daughter, their letter now a complication resolved.

For a while I float just outside of myself like I am watching a film of my life. I don't understand what is happening to time. I'll remember this, I keep thinking. I'll remember the way the light hit Petersham water tower in the afternoon. I'll remember the smell of the brief cherry blossoms that line Marrickville Road. I'll remember the sound of the ibis hunting in the red bin outside my bedroom window while I get ready for work. I write it all down, anyway, just in case.

I watch myself standing in grey walled classrooms with other people's daughters and wonder whether they notice the way their teacher is becoming a daughter, too.

It feels significant now, that the story started in autumn, on a day when I happened to be at the hospital. But it was spring in London, and Dad was at home, and it wasn't the beginning, not really. A diagnosis always feels like the beginning of a different story when it's only the start of knowing how it ends.

But this is a tragedy, and Aristotle says a tragedy must have a beginning. So it starts here: in autumn, *in medias res*.

Before I move to London I write. I write instead of packing. Instead of saying goodbye. I write endings for old beginnings. New beginnings for long-forgotten endings. There isn't enough time for all of the words. The more I write the less I feel like a draft. And then I start the process of editing. Swap out Sydney for London. Autumn for spring.

"At least you'll have time to write," says a friend.

## Spring

The first time I meet John Keats I have just arrived in London.

On the fifth floor of Guy's Hospital I help Dad settle into a blue leather recliner by the window. From here you can see all the way from Borough to St Paul's, the cathedral's greenish dome peeking out from behind glass towers, on the other side of the Thames.

There's something so strange about the way chemotherapy is administered, publicly, in this big open room full of blue leather recliners in a semicircle facing the nurse's station. Most of the other recliners are occupied by old men sleeping, wives perched on hard stools next to them, reading or doing a crossword. Three middle-aged women sit alone, sometimes sleeping, sometimes reading. The nurses are all women, I remember thinking, but I'm new to this business of care and don't yet see the pattern or how I am part of it. A nurse with soft skin who finds the vein on the first go, slips the silver cover over the sack of liquid marked with a skull and crossbones that will leak slowly into his body over the next eight hours, and disappears.

While he sleeps, I write. Not stories or poems or sentences, nothing that requires my brain to thread, or stitch. Just details. I have written this way for as long as I can remember, whenever I am afraid to forget.

The nurse's name: Rita. No older than 25. She smells like rose water. Like Turkish delight.

The way the building has so obviously been designed to feel "homely," not like a hospital, but it doesn't, because it is.

The huge artworks everywhere. I am pretty sure they are close-ups of flowers and leaves. But they look like scans, cells. Like cancer.

When I run out of details I take the lift downstairs. A woman's soft voice announces our arrival at each new floor as the elevator slices through the building. *Chemotherapy Village. Radiotherapy Village.* I understand the desire to dress a hospital in something other than death. But it doesn't quite work, for me. There are already too many mixed metaphors in the story of death.

Outside the hospital I find Keats sitting in a stone alcove rescued from the rubble of the old London Bridge. For six years Keats trained to be a surgeon at this hospital. He spent longer in medical school than as a poet, though I didn't know that, then. A plaque at the alcove reads: "a poet is a sage; a humanist, physician to all men," from *Hyperion*, an epic poem in fragments, abandoned by the poet while he cared for his brother.

For eight hours I sit with John Keats and wait for my Dad to wake up.

In the small garden surrounding Keats's alcove there are always flowers, and they are always in full bloom.

I'd remembered how to write again just before the year of two autumns, after ten years of teaching others to write and forgetting how. In the beer garden of a pub in Newtown a friend told me she had applied for a Masters in creative writing, and I did, too. In my early twenties I'd submitted a piece of writing to the university's undergraduate journal, a sort of origin story of estrangement I'd workshopped in a creative writing class. The editor told me the story was unfinished, and all stories need a definitive end, so I wrote one: the mother got sick. Sickness is a convenient way to end a story, I thought.

On the night of the journal's launch I got stuck talking to a pony-tailed man from my creative writing class, whose stories in workshops were variations on the theme "pony-tailed man makes *passionate love* to a woman unnamed." He asked which story I had submitted to the journal.

"Of course," he said, when I replied. "Women are always writing about themselves."

I never did find out if my mother read that story, but my Dad did.

"I wonder what you'd write about me, swee-har," he said.

I stopped writing, after that.

In London the story stays the same, for a while. In the afternoons after I go to the chemist, after I cook his breakfast and clean the flat and organise the pills, after I clean the sheets and empty the buckets and answer his mail, I meet my sister downstairs. To avoid agitating him we learn quickly never to mention illness, or care, to pretend we don't notice the way he winces, to nod when he talks of returning to work, of the two of us on holiday instead of on pause. I miss when we were different people with different names and different lives, before we became The Daughter. I miss when we could speak to each other not about pain.

In the stairwell we hand over notes where he can't hear: his temperature was high, but it seems okay now. A new pain has arrived in the small of the back. Music is making him agitated, even Rod Stewart. The landlord is asking for rent.

When my sister goes upstairs I sit for a while on the stoop. It is hard to leave, harder to stay.

I get the train to Hampstead, to walk on the heath. It's one of my favourite places in this city, 800 acres of wild green, dogs running off-leash, yellow cowslips and bluebells and purple forget-me-nots in spring.

It's a while before I notice how everything in Hampstead is Keats themed. *Keats Apothecary* chemist. *Keats Group Practice* surgery. Down Keats Grove is Keats House, a small museum in the Regency cottage where the poet lived in the last years of his life. I have a strange feeling of being followed everywhere I go by the ghost of John Keats.

Back in the blue recliners high above London a young woman and her girlfriend arrive and sit down in the chairs opposite my dad. She has lost her hair and looks small, like a child,

but aged, too. She cries softly and the nurse who smells like Turkish delight speaks to her in a low, quiet voice in this strange room of poison with no privacy. She is too sick for treatment today. Her bloods weren't good. She needs to rest. Everyone in the semicircle is looking at her: there is nowhere else to look.

In the blue recliners old men sleep and old women look up from their books or crosswords to watch as she leaves. I watch these women and think of them at home, in the nights, pulling on their gloves and face masks, double flushing the toilet, washing the sheets on hot, looking up recipes for when everything tastes like metal. I think of them alone next to a fading man and wonder how long they wait when they call an ambulance, wonder when they last had time to cry, wonder if anyone asks how they are, who they are.

I watch my Dad watching the woman. He looks scared for the first time since I arrived.

Later, on the train home, he looks tired.

"Do you think I should be depressed?" he asks.

I want to give him a hug, but I don't. The nurse says to be careful, right after chemo, that cytotoxic chemicals can cause cancer in the cancer free. Besides, I am sure he will feel the answer in my body.

It is late by the time he falls asleep watching *Gilmore Girls*. I return to Keats, Rory and Lorelai sparring in the background.

In the autumn of 1820 Keats left England for Italy with a friend, the artist Joseph Severn. The pair sailed to Naples aboard the *Maria Crowther* in search of the healing Italian sun Keats's doctor hoped would restore his health. But Keats had spent six years in medical school, and he knew, by then, that he was dying. Earlier in the year he had coughed up blood so red he told Charles Brown he would certainly die.

"I cannot be deceived in that colour," said Keats. "That drop of blood is my death warrant—I must die."

The poet had watched as his brother died from the same disease only two years earlier, John cooking and reading to Tom as his lungs corroded and his blood boiled. Their mother had died of consumption, and Keats had been her devoted carer, too, eight years before. He already knew how his own story would end.

When the ship arrived in Naples, Italy was facing a typhus epidemic that had spread throughout Europe after the Year Without a Summer. For ten days the ship was quarantined in the Bay of Naples.

"O what an account I could give you of the Bay of Naples," wrote the poet from the ship in a letter to the mother of Fanny Brawne, "if I could once more feel myself a Citizen of this world."

In a letter to a friend, Severn wrote of a young woman also aboard the ship, also dying of tuberculosis, whose presence seemed to make Keats upset.

"The other lady passenger arrived soon after—a Miss Cotterell—very lady like but a sad martyr to her illness which is to a jot the same as Keats."

In *Miscellanies*, John Aubrey wrote about the myth of what he called "one's being divided into a two-fold person": if you see your double, he says, you will soon die.

Keats's friend Shelley claimed to see his doppelganger just weeks before he drowned at sea with a copy of Keats's poetry in his pocket.

Neither the cockney poet nor my Dad could say these young women were their doppelgangers, but in the face of a young woman both men saw how they would end.

*I feel like I am in quarantine, too, I wrote in my journal that night, next to my transcription of the letters from the Bay of Naples. Like a ghost stranded in this attic somewhere outside of my life.*

It's only now, reading back through my journal, that I notice the world's double, our own borders drawn shut, all of us quarantined somewhere off the shore of our lives.

A text from a friend: *Are you writing?*

In my journal, I write: *A text from a friend: Are you writing?*

I want to write, but I have a sense of being in someone else's story myself, and I am afraid of how it ends.

I'm not sure how to say that in a text message, and it's midnight in Australia, so I don't write back.

In the British Library I browse the Keats collection. I want to look at his letters but the woman at the desk who is a caricature of a librarian more than she is a person tells me I would need to apply for a reader's pass, that I would need proof of my address in the UK, utility bills, the kinds of thing ghosts do not have, and I am suddenly aware that I haven't changed my clothes in three days.

Outside the library I sit and read the letters on my phone. I am less interested in the poems than I am in the letters, less interested in the art than I am in the life that resists the shape of narrative. The poet writes of death and care, of art and medicine and the fertile space of uncertainty he calls negative capability.

I keep trying to write to my own friends, back in Sydney, but I don't know what to say.

Instead of writing, I read. Medical journals, cancer forums, research papers. I read about chemotherapy: Cisplatin, Pemetrexed, Docetaxel. The drugs with the worst side effects are made from platinum. It's a noble metal, resistant to corrosion, perfect for car parts, jewellery, chemotherapy. It's more expensive than gold and much rarer: all the platinum ever mined would fit into a 7.6 cubic metre box. I make a note to tell Dad he's full of a precious metal even more valuable than gold, on a day when he can hear me, on a day when he knows who I am. The human body is not resistant to corrosion.

I look for answers to questions that only seem to annoy the doctors when I ask. The doctors hate it when we have been reading.

"What does your daughter do for work?" asks one oncologist, when I ask too many questions.

Although I am not teaching I tell him I am a teacher. Even when I am writing I do not feel like a writer. I think about saying I am a carer, but I don't, because he knows.

"You shouldn't be googling," he says, to the floor. "We are looking after him."

I wonder who he thinks is looking after him the rest of the time. I wonder if he knows that all of this began with a bit of a mix up, swee-har.

It's a late spring afternoon when I go into the Keats museum for the first time. The house is quiet, just me and an older gentleman in a grey striped suit with wild hair, like an elderly Boris Johnson. Inside it's a mixture of tacky recreations and original features: plastic bread sits on an original sideboard, original jewellery rests on cabinets made to look antique. Inside are Keats's tools from his days as a trainee surgeon at Guys.

On the wall is a three-dimensional life mask of the poet with a sign that says: TOUCH ME. It doesn't look much like the Keats I know, the one in the alcove. The nose is smaller. The cheeks fuller. I wait for the old man to go upstairs before I touch the face.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, huge sash windows look out over the heath. Above the bed is a framed drawing by Severn, of the poet hunched in a chair in their room in Rome.

"Drawn to keep me awake," Severn has scrawled. "A deadly sweat was on him all this night."

Under glass is the poet's copy of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, underlined and annotated in Keats's neat hand. "I write of melancholy," explains Burton in the preface, "by being busy to avoid melancholy. There is no greater cause of melancholy than idleness, no better cure than business."

A bored looking teenager in a uniform sits on a green velvet chaise longue and doesn't look up from her phone. I check mine: two missed calls. I feel annoyed and ashamed at feeling annoyed and my chest feels tight, so I walk quickly back down Keats Grove, back to the station, back to the flat. I can hear the *Gilmore Girls* as I climb the narrow stairs to the attic flat, where he is asleep with his mouth open on the old blue couch.

"Swee-har," he says, when I wake him for his medication, "you left me."

## Summer

In the gift shop at the National Portrait Gallery I almost buy a plaster replica of Keats's life mask for 160 pounds. By now I am running out of money, but something strange is happening. I keep wanting to buy things for no reason.

A woman with a face crinkled with concern asks me if I am okay, and I realise I am holding a plaster replica of John Keats's life mask and crying.

*The strangest thing happened*, I imagine the woman with the crinkled face saying at the dinner table. *This poor woman, crying over John Keats!*

When I get outside I can't stop laughing, and I don't know why.

A friend from home buys me a ticket to the launch of Zadie Smith's new collection, *Grand Union*. It feels strange, being in this room in Mayfair with ornate ceilings and spiral staircases and so many people, none of them dying. The writer speaks about Hegelian dialectics which she explains as the idea that you can hold two opposing views simultaneously, so as to create a third space where we can lie to ourselves.

On the way out of the venue I see the white-coated oncologist across the road with a man who looks exactly like him. He turns his head while I am staring and looks at me, and I realise he has no idea who I am. For a moment I am angry, though I am not sure why. Then I remember how I compartmentalise care, too, and think of all the times I have been out in Sydney, for dinner or dancing or a book launch like this, when a teenager waves and says "hi miss!" and I have no idea who they are.

One evening after another eight hours in the blue recliners I bring Dad to the alcove and tell him about Keats. By now the cancer has spread into his spine, and the hospital wheelchair is older than Dad and heavier than me, but I want him to sit with me in the alcove so I heave the chair up onto the grass.

The gold and orange roses look cartoonish against the neat green grass.

“Fucking hell,” he screams, wincing. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

And then, softly: “I’m sorry, swee-har.”

A group of nurses in turquoise uniforms stand smoking on the other side of the courtyard, pretending not to notice us, and I pretend Dad might be interested in Keats. How he worked in this hospital, once. How he was nicknamed the cockney poet. I show him how the statue talks: if you hold your phone here, John Keats will call to tell you about how art is like medicine, how it heals us, too.

I don’t tell him Keats died of tuberculosis when he was 25 years old. I don’t tell him he probably caught it while caring for his brother, Tom.

In an ambulance on the way to Kings Hospital the paramedic flirts with me while he sticks ECG pads to my dad’s chest. He seems nice enough. Irish. Quite young. He likes my hair. He likes my accent. He lived in Mel-borne for a while, back in 2009.

“Why on earth would you live in rainy old England?” He says, as he fixes the mask to my Dad’s face.

Dad screams with every jolt. I don’t scream, even though I want to. I watch myself in this ambulance with my sister and this man and my Dad and I don’t understand, then, that this is just how it is, after a while, in the kingdom of the ill. You’ve seen the ending so many times it just becomes part of the story. So much of caring looks like not caring at all.

“What the hell was that?” asks my sister, in the waiting room of the hospital. I am relieved to not be imagining things when everything feels unreal. I am relieved to be there together, to feel like two people, again.

It is ten hours before he is seen by a doctor, ten days before we can take him home.

“Don’t forget to take care of yourselves,” says the ward nurse, as she hands us the bag with his medications.

While he sleeps through *Gilmore Girls* on the old blue couch I fight with people on the internet. I am looking for information on Pembrolizumab, the immunotherapy drug, trying to find out why his feet could be swollen or his skin itchy or why some days he doesn’t know who I am. Immunotherapy is a relatively new form of treatment for this kind of cancer, but the results are promising in the face of a terminal diagnosis. Under the NHS, Dad’s infusions are free.

Most of the carers on the forums are American women. They post about how they can’t afford their own medication anymore, now that their warrior has cancer. So they stop taking their medication for depression, for diabetes, for heart problems and blood pressure and cholesterol, but it’s ok, they say. They post about the power of staying positive for their warriors, of God’s will. They talk about how they will beat this disease and buy t-shirts that say Fuck Cancer!, post photos of themselves next to withering men.

I post about Dad’s disintegrating body, looking for ways to ease the steroid aggression that makes a sweet man so angry.

“See! THIS is why it’s free!” One woman writes. “You don’t get a choice! At least in America we can choose what treatments our warriors get!”

In America, it can cost ten thousand American dollars every three weeks for immunotherapy without decent health insurance. I understand why they need to believe the story of personal choice, though. We are always telling ourselves stories to keep from fragmenting.

In my journal I record the conversation verbatim, even though I wonder about the ethics of writing someone else’s tragedy in my own hand.

That night I get an email that says I have been shortlisted for a literary competition I barely remember entering, and for a moment I feel I am back in my own life. I get so excited I forget I haven't washed my hands, rub liquid morphine in my eye, squeal loud enough to wake Dad.

"You look like shit, swee-har," he says. "What's wrong?"

I get the train to Hampstead, to walk on the heath, but I end up in the alcove outside the hospital, with Keats. I don't know how I got here but I sit for a while like a statue, and then I go home. I stop leaving the flat, after that, except to go to the chemist, except to take him to appointments, except to go downstairs when I feel I might scream or cry, though I never can.

In the hospital transport van on the way to an appointment we practice for the test.

"What do you think, swee-har?" He says. "Eight out of ten?"

It's the same conversation every time. He is afraid that if they know how bad the pain is they will stop the treatment. He is afraid that stopping the chemo means certain death. I don't say that I am afraid continuing means certain death, that death is certain anyway even though the doctors don't say it because he doesn't ask.

It takes three hours to drive 20 miles from the flat in South London to the hospital at Southwark on the south side of the Thames. We stop to pick up others like us, mostly older men too sick or too poor to get to the hospital, and their mothers, daughters, wives.

"My daughter is a teacher," says Dad, to one of the wives, an older woman who says her name is Edwidge.

She asks if I will read her short story, pulls it out of her bag before I can answer. I spend the rest of the trip reading her story, wondering what I can possibly say to this woman, in this van, about this story. When we get to the hospital I tell her I like it and she gives me a twenty pound note, even though she looks like she needs it more.

The doctor asks questions that are supposed to test for cognitive decline.

Who is the prime minister: Boris Johnson.

We laugh. "Dad has named the tumour Boris," I say, but the doctor doesn't laugh. What year is it? 2019. What day of the week is it? He doesn't know. But neither do I. There is only ever today.

He asks Dad to draw a clock. Dad draws a square. He can't remember any numbers, so he draws none. He asks what pain relief Dad is currently taking and looks annoyed when I rattle off the list, as though the man to my left who is already becoming a ghost, who just drew a square with no numbers, might be organising his own medications, might be updating the medication spreadsheet or pouring out the morphine or peeling off the fentanyl patches or making sure he takes the pills at the right time, every day.

"Quite the little doctor you've got there," the doctor says, without looking at me.

And then: "Let's look at the scans."

He leans over and drags the wheelchair so that Dad is sitting next to him, angles the computer screen so that I can't see it, and points: *here, here, here*.

"You're going to write about this, aren't you swee-har," Dad says, on the way home.

The London summer is brief but hot. I am wilting. We all are.



## Autumn

By autumn the flowers in the alcove are purple and blue, and by now I know they aren't magical or everlasting, just replaced at the first sign of decay.

In another white-walled office another white-coated oncologist says the treatment is going well.

Dad vomits into the one of those cardboard buckets that look like little top hats. We all pause while the doctor throws it into the bin, gets another cardboard bucket from the cupboard.

"Could you explain what you mean?" I say, loudly enough that my phone will pick up my voice when I listen back to the recording. It makes it easier, having a recording, when we get back to the flat, and he wants me to explain what the doctor said.

"Swee-har-" snaps Dad, his voice sharp.

The doctor schedules the next chemo. I wonder who he is talking to, who the treatment is going well for.

Outside, we sit and wait for the hospital transport van to arrive to take us back to the flat. It is dark when the doctor walks past, backpack on, white coat hung up for the day.

At the cancer centre we wait. So much of caring is waiting. Waiting in hospitals. Waiting for my number to be called at the pharmacy. Waiting for a doctor. Waiting for results. Waiting for an ambulance. Waiting. Two hours. Four hours. Ten hours. Standing up. Sitting on the floor. There are never enough chairs. No matter; the cancer has spread into his spine now and folded him in half. He sits slumped in his wheelchair next to me and I check every once in a while to make sure he is still breathing, like I used to do at home in Marrickville when my cat was still for too long. His experience of time is compressed by pain, at least, so he doesn't notice the wait. My experience of time expands until it takes up the whole room. Every minute watching someone you love in pain might be ten years long.

The waiting room is full of our doubles. One person—mostly men—asleep or unconscious in a chair; the other a wife or daughter or mother standing, staring up at the huge screen that takes up the whole wall, anxiously waiting for a familiar name. The only sounds are phones ringing and the receptionist's angular northern accent. "Cancer," she says, when she answers the phone.

After three hours I ask the receptionist when we might be seen.

"Sorry, love, I don't know," she says. Then she perks up. "Are you Australian?"

I nod.

"My sister lives in Australia," she says. "Why on earth would you come to grey old England?" she laughs, as though I haven't been standing next to my sweet Dad folded in half on the other side of the room for the last three hours, staring at the screen and waiting for his name to appear.

"I am on a holiday," I say, instead of screaming until my lungs are sore.

One evening I take Dad to the alcove again and tell him about Keats. Dad scratches at the skin above his heart and pretends to care, and I pretend not to notice that he doesn't care, can't care anymore about whatever reading hole I have lately been escaping into. We sit there together, me, dad, and John Keats, while ambulance sirens ring out around us, all of us marked by an early death.

In the room with the blue recliners the nurse that smells like Turkish delight looks for a little too long at Dad and directs us to a private room. I want to ask why, but I don't, because I know, though I don't realise it at the time.

"Our own room! Luxury!" I say, or maybe my sister does. I can't be sure, there is no time to write it down. Dad laughs. Tries to hide the way laughing hurts. So much of caring is pretending not to notice, not to care.

I watch the nurse watching me as I peel his shoes from his swollen feet, get him comfortable on the bed. She watches me watch her as she connects the tube, hooks up the bag. He is asleep before she is done.

"You know," she says to us, "your Dad is lucky to have daughters like you."

Then she says my name.

For a moment I can't breathe. It has been so long since I have heard someone say my name I didn't even notice I had lost it.

## Autumn, Again

In an underground classroom at the University of Sydney the writer Fiona Wright reads to us from an essay on healthcare, the body, and the work of writing. I can feel myself shifting as she speaks, the shame of my own writing growing smaller. Afterwards, she asks for questions. There are some: craft, career. When she leaves, a man who says he is a journalist asks the question I am afraid is always lingering in the air whenever women write about their lives, the question that is always lingering in my own mind whenever I write about mine.

"Isn't this all a bit narcissistic?"

"How do you mean?" asks the teacher, a softly spoken American woman who, I think, knows exactly what he means.

"I mean, what has she actually done? Why would we read about her life? I would read a memoir about someone who has *done* something," he says. "Like Malcolm Turnbull. Someone like that."

As if living isn't doing. As if writing isn't doing. As if only some bodies are worth living in, worth writing about.

It is autumn in Sydney before I see John Keats again, in the grey walled classroom, north of the Bridge. Normally it's Plath, now, but after weeks of lockdown nothing is normal, and Plath is too depressing for teenagers whose entire lives until recently have been compressed into their bedrooms, the outside world dangerous and full of virus. And so somehow we have settled on Keats, thinking it less depressing to watch a young man die on a big screen, coughing his way into the grave. They don't seem to notice the connection, and I don't point it out, but everywhere is the virus and the lungs and all I can think of is a white-coated doctor pointing at the screen and saying *here, here, here*.

The last time she saw John Keats, Fanny Brawne wrote in her notebook: *Mr Keats has left for Rome*. The moment is played up, in Campion's film.

"Let's pretend I will return in spring," Keats says, as Fanny cries softly, in the orange-red autumn garden of what is now Keats House.

As the film closes, Fanny walks through the wintry heath, now frozen and dark, reciting *Bright Star, were I steadfast as thou art*. I am surprised by the way the film winds

me, even though I know all the details Campion left out, even though I know how the story ends before the film begins.

Now that I am home in Sydney, I wonder what part of me has been pretending I might return to London to find my Dad still alive.

One of my students blows her nose and I am suddenly aware of where I am. Everyone in the room is crying, now, at the film's sad ending or their own sad endings, or the way the pandemic seems to have split all our stories in two.

I throw a packet of tissues over the masking tape border that indicates a COVID-safe distance between me and the students and remind them to move apart, especially now that they're crying.

I try to pretend I have not been crying, try to pass off my crying as laughing, try to remember I'm not a daughter in this room, in this story, where I am firstly a teacher of other people's daughters.

But stories have a way of overlapping. And this is not the first time I have cried over John Keats.