

# SONGS FOR THE MERMAID TAVERN

Five Keats Settings for Voice and Piano

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John Keats was born in London in 1795 and died of tuberculosis in Rome in 1821, where he had gone to seek a better climate.

The poems chosen demonstrate the range of Keats' poetic talent, from the musings on life and love of "In Drear-nighted December" and "When I Have Fears to the magic and mystery in his feline friend; from the silly doggerel of "Song About Myself", written for his sister, to the celebration of fellow poets in "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern", a famous drinking place in London, said to have been a favorite of Shakespeare.

**SONGS FOR THE MERMAID TAVERN** was composed in State College, Pennsylvania and New York City in January and February 2009.

## In Drear-nighted December

In drear-nighted December,  
Too happy, happy tree,  
Thy branches ne'er remember  
Their green felicity;  
The north cannot undo them  
With a sleety whistle through them;  
Nor frozen thawings glue them  
From budding at the prime.

In drear-nighted December,  
Too happy, happy brook,  
Thy bubblings ne'er remember  
Apollo's summer look;  
But with a sweet forgetting, \\\nThey stay their crystal fretting,  
Never, never petting  
About the frozen time.

Ah! would 'twere so with many  
A gentle girl and boy!  
But were there ever any  
Writh'd not of passed joy?  
The feel of not to feel it,  
When there is none to heal it,  
Nor numbed sense to steel it,  
Was never said in rhyme.

## Sonnet to a Cat

Cat! who hast pass'd thy grand climacteric,  
How many mice and rats hast in thy days  
Destroy'd? - How many tit bits stolen? Gaze  
With those bright languid segments green, and prick  
Those velvet ears - but prythee do not stick  
Thy latent talons in me - and upraise  
Thy gentle mew - and tell me all thy frays  
Of fish and mice, and rats and tender chick.  
Nay, look not down, nor lick thy dainty wrists -  
For all the wheezy asthma, - and for all  
Thy tail's tip is nick'd off - and though the fists  
Of many a maid have given thee many a maul,  
Still is that fur as soft as when the lists  
In youth thou enter'dst on glass bottled wall.

## When I Have Fears

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
    Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,  
    Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
    Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
    Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!  
    That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
    Of unreflecting love! - then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

## Song about Myself

1.

There was a naughty Boy,  
A naughty boy was he,  
He would not stop at  
home,  
He could not quiet be –  
He took  
In his Knapsack  
A Book  
Full of vowels  
And a shirt  
With some towels –  
A slight cap  
For night cap –  
A hair brush,  
Comb ditto,  
New Stockings  
For old ones  
Would split O!  
This Knapsack  
Tight at his back  
He rivetted close  
And followed his Nose  
To the North,  
To the North,  
And follow'ed his nose  
To the North.

2.

There was a naughty boy  
And a naughty boy was he,  
For nothing would he do  
But scribble poetry –  
He took  
An ink stand  
In his hand  
And a pen  
Big as ten  
In the other,  
And away  
In a Pother

He ran  
To the mountains  
And fountains  
And ghostes  
And Postes  
And witches  
And ditches  
And wrote  
In his coat  
When the weather  
Was cool,  
Fear of gout,  
And without  
When the weather  
Was warm –  
Och the charm  
When we choose  
To follow one's nose  
To the north,  
To the north,  
To follow one's nose  
To the north!

3.

There was a naughty boy  
And a naughty boy was he,  
He kept little fishes  
In washing tubs three  
In spite  
Of the might  
Of the maid  
Nor afraid  
Of his Granny-good –  
He often would  
Hurly burly  
Get up early  
And go  
By hook or crook  
To the brook  
And bring home  
Miller's thumb,

Tittlebat  
Not over fat,  
Minnows small  
As the stall  
Of a glove,  
Not above  
The size  
Of a nice  
Little Baby's  
Little fingers –  
O he made  
'Twas his trade  
Of Fish a pretty Kettle  
A Kettle  
Of Fish a pretty Kettle  
A Kettle!

4.

There was a naughty Boy,  
And a naughty Boy was he,  
He ran away to Scotland  
The people for to see –  
There he found  
That the ground  
Was as hard,  
That a yard  
Was as long,  
That a song  
Was as merry,  
That a cherry  
Was as red –  
That lead  
Was as weighty,  
That fourscore  
Was as eighty,  
That a door  
Was as wooden  
As in England –  
So he stood in his shoes  
And he wonder'd,  
He wonder'd,  
He stood in his shoes  
And he wonder'd.

## **Lines on the Mermaid Tavern**

Souls of Poets dead and gone,  
What Elysium have ye known,  
Happy field or mossy cavern,  
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?  
Have ye tippled drink more fine  
Than mine host's Canary wine?  
Or are fruits of Paradise  
Sweeter than those dainty pies  
Of venison? O generous food!  
Drest as though bold Robin Hood  
Would, with his maid Marian,  
Sup and bowse from horn and can.

I have heard that on a day  
Mine host's signboard flew away,  
Nobody knew whither, till  
An astrologer's old quill  
To a sheepskin gave the story,  
Said he saw you in your glory,  
Underneath a new old sign  
Sipping beverage divine,  
And pledging with contented smack  
The Mermaid in the Zodiac.

Souls of Poets dead and gone,  
What Elysium have ye known,  
Happy field or mossy cavern,  
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?