Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

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The head of Keats that Severn
drew at three in the morning,
“to keep myself awake,” brought
me to Rome and the room
where he died under a ceiling
of phony roses.

That sketch of a face on a pillow
and its shadow black on the wall—stark,
haunting even, though
the eyes are closed, his lashes
thick as a girl’s. Some inky curls
figured on the forehead
are limp and matted wet with fever.
From the long deft line
of the nose, the pen never lifted.
The scrutiny of Severn is in it,
the exactness of his seeing,
all those nights and days
when nothing else was.

The first morning in Rome
I walked to Keats’ house
the roundabout way he’d ridden
his rented horse through the big streets,
past the churches, up the hill
from Piazza del Popolo, where there’s a view—
as much of Rome as he ever saw.

In small hours, to stay awake,
Severn rigged a thread from one candle
going out to the wick of another.
Keats, his wide eyes growing into death,
saw it sputter like a firefly and told
at morning of a little fairy lamplighter.

He called for more and more books,
though he read little, the smell
of his rotting lungs competing
with the smell of leather.
He practiced the new Italian
in his head and, studying the roses
on the ceiling, turned the Greek
sweet music of his mind
to warm pictures of daffodils
on Hampstead Heath, a patch of
English violets on his Roman grave.

We want to be changed
by what we enter, the dry,
bright air of warmer places
to which we book passage,
roads of emperors and poets strewn
with marble victories,
intimate rooms where the famous
dead lived vividly, where what
was beautiful was not easy
and what was true was almost endurable.

The room where Keats died
is smaller than I had supposed
and narrow and empty.
No bed, no chair, no candle, no book.
Only, on the wall, Severn's sketch,
about the size of a thumbprint,
and roses on the ceiling
blooming in squares, gaudy and gold.