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## TWO SONNETS BY JOHN KEATS (1795-1821)

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### THE HUMAN SEASONS

Four Seasons fill the measure of the year;  
 There are four seasons in the mind of man:  
 He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear  
 Takes in all beauty with an easy span:  
 He has his Summer, when luxuriously  
 Spring's honeyed cud of youthful thought he loves  
 To ruminat, and by such dreaming high  
 Is nearest unto Heaven: quiet coves  
 His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings  
 He furlath close; contented so to look  
 On mists in idleness—to let fair things  
 Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook:  
 He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,  
 Or else he would forego his mortal nature.

### WHEN I HAVE FEARS THAT I MAY CEASE TO BE

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.

*John Keats*

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## THE PASSING OF A YEAR AND PASSING

John Keats, one of the greatest English Romantic poets of the early 19th century, had a short but highly productive literary life in the 4 years before his death at age 25. Many know his classic musings, "To a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale," as well as sonnets including "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." On the passing of a most challenging and tumultuous year, two Keats sonnets prove worthy of thought. Several reasons support this. First, Keats was a marvelous poet with his work standing as genius still today. Second, he is frequently claimed as a medical brethren and thus a "literary" physician. His medical training was sincere and rigorous. Although he never ended up practicing medicine or surgery, he did take loving care of his tubercular mother and brother who both died on his watch. And third, like many caregivers today, he also died of tuberculosis, which was epidemic during his young life and which he described as the "family disease."

About a year after his mother's death, Keats decided to become a doctor and was apprenticed at age 15 for 4 years to a surgeon in his rural England hometown. He also read great literature, which is important to his story. In late 1815, Keats moved near his brothers in London and began training as a dresser, perhaps what we would think of as a surgery resident, at Guy's Hospital. He passed the Apothecaries' Examination and would have been qualified to practice medicine when his age reached 21. All the while he was writing poetry, his real passion. He enrolled again at Guy's Hospital for further study in 1816 but was soon introduced to James Henry Leigh Hunt, an English poet, essayist, publisher, and provocateur (he was jailed for critique of the Prince Regent). Keats at that time wrote his first momentous poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Hunt praised the work, and Keats abandoned medicine as a career for the romance of life and literature. He died just a few years later while "taking the cure" in Italy.

The two featured poems were both written in 1818. "Human Seasons" was published in 1819, but "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" came out posthumously in 1848. They both are introspective works from someone sensitive enough to think deeply about the pathos of life, death, and passages and write about them. "Human Seasons" can be looked at superficially as an annual quarterly cadence of the calendar parsed into relationships with weather, blooming flowers, autumnal colors, and passing of time. However, what it really reflects are our own internal seasons with the lusty youthful quarter, an evolution to a summer of maturation, a third quarter of middle age with winter and the cycle's end in sight, and a final quarter that is the most reflective. The years evolve and bring different events through seasons, but death is destiny and inevitable. Keats' more intense and explicit "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" dealt with that. Why it was published decades after his death is unclear. The two sonnets complement one another and should spark introspection. They are not meant to be morose, but in this year of challenge, it is worth enjoying the cleverness and beauty of Keats' wordsmithing, pondering his tubercular affliction leading to death, and reflecting on the wonder of the seasons as well as inevitability tempered by unpredictability inherent in this pandemic year.

**Note:** *To all aspiring poets, we invite you to submit your musing for possible inclusion in this journal. Please submit your poem in a Word document, including your name, specialty, and affiliation, to [mdcvj@houstonmethodist.org](mailto:mdcvj@houstonmethodist.org).*

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