



Letter to Myself, Much Younger

Alan Jenkins

BEFORE I SAY ANYTHING I want to believe that you'll read this carefully, take it in, maybe even remember it — at least for a while. Somehow, knowing you as well as I do, I doubt it.

In fact I'm not here to lecture you, or hector you, or try to persuade you to do things differently — though I do wish you could relax a little, not be in such a hurry, not be so impatient. You're a quick learner and your instinct for the real thing, meaning whatever works for you, can be trusted — but oh, how quick you are to dismiss the rest, when a lot of it would bear a second look, and probably a third. Still.

Ever since that afternoon in a hot classroom when you were fourteen, you've known, with an iron certainty, what you're here for: what you'll spend your life trying to do, to make. But it's a clandestine kind of knowledge, something you carry around like a guilty secret. What if you're deluded, what if you have no claim at all, no ability, no talent? And even if you do, is it a *legitimate aim in life*? – Not as far as you're concerned, for of course it is, the *only* legitimate aim – but as the world goes?

I'd like to reassure you, to tell you that it will all work out somehow, but what would that mean to you? For now you just have to wonder whether you'll always be undercover, in disguise — and if you are, what will your cover story be, your alibi up there in 'the real world'?

Meanwhile, follow your hunches, find what you need, learn the lessons



that matter: in twentieth-century masters, at first, whose *Collected Poems* you borrow one after the other from the little local library where they've sat almost undisturbed for years, bring back home and devour, alone in your room. Copying their styles, their mannerisms, you sit banging out verses on the huge old Underwood your girlfriend's father – 'Antiques and second-hand furniture, houses cleared' – brought you one day: your apprenticeship. If only you could have the friendship of fellow-poets, the respect of your peers! But all that's some years in the future. Your life so far hasn't given you much social confidence, and your parents, loving and supportive as they try to be, don't really understand what's going on. You will make false starts and some awful misjudgements, but some things *will* come right in ways you can't yet imagine (though not in many of the ways you *do* imagine). You might not write the things you think you want to. But you'll write the things you *have* to.

That line you come across somewhere, from a much older master: *The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne*. It confers a kind of authority and dignity on what you're already doing entirely by impulse, but you'll be the age I am now before you really understand its force, its truth, and what it means for you — since *what* it means is different for everyone to whom it means anything at all. Until then all I can wish you is the 'fearlessness' a great poet wished me once, when he inscribed my copy of his book for me; and the good luck that sometimes comes a poet's way, and the sense to know that really, a poet's whole life is luck, pure luck. The rest, as someone said, is the madness of art.