



Letter to My Younger Self

Martyn Crucefix

DEAR MARTYN,

You will have just got off the train from London Bridge. It's 1976. The end of a day studying Medicine which you begin to hate. And now back to Eltham Park, to digs you've loathed since you arrived (the well-meaning landlady is no substitute for your mother). Probably you walked past that little music shop somewhere near the station, spending minutes gazing at that red, sunburst acoustic guitar in the window. If it doesn't sound too weird, I can tell you — you'll buy it and strum on it for ten years or more. I can also confirm your fear: you fail your first-year exams. The Medical School allows you to leave... But listen, that sense of failure and lostness, it will pass.

Keep on with the music, though your playing is not up to much and your singing...well, the less said. But writing songs will eventually lead somewhere. And the illicit books! You are supposed to be reading the monumental *Gray's Anatomy*, textbooks on Pharmacology, Biochemistry, all emptying like sand out of your head. You've yet to go into that charity shop and pick up a book called *The Manifold and the One* by Agnes Arber. You'll be attracted by the philosophical-sounding title; in your growing unhappiness at Medical School you have a sense of becoming deep. The questions you ask don't have any easy answers, and you have a notion this is called philosophy. Amidst the dissections, test tubes and bunsens, you'll find consolation in Arber's idea that life is an imperfect struggle of 'the awry and the fragmentary'.



And those mawkish song lyrics you're writing? They'll become more dense, exchanging singer-songwriting clichés for clichés you clumsily pick up from reading Wordsworth (you love the countryside), Sartre's *Nausea* (you know you're depressed) and Allan Watts' *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (you are unsure of who you are). Up ahead, you take a year out to study English A level at an FE College. Your newly chosen philosophy degree gradually morphs into a literature one and with a dose of Sartrean self-creativity (life being malleable, existence rather than essence) you edit the university's poetry magazine, write stories, write plays, even act a little (fallen amongst theatricals!).

At some point the English Romantic writers get a grip on you, taking you to Oxford where you really *do* conceive of yourself as a poet, get something published, hang out with others who want the same. Then guess what – for a teenager who'd so little to say for himself in class – teaching becomes a way of continuing to study and write while making a living. It suits. It takes us out of ourselves.

Along the way, you write some poems you are proud of. You will suffer the writer's curse, of course: the recurrent fear of not being able to turn the trick again. But I'm sending this to say, through all the years ahead, it is *words* that will infinitely enrich your life. So pick up the pad you doodle on in lectures. Write a line. Write another line. I see you hunched over a dim-lit desk, but no question – yes – you are heading in my direction.