

# Letters to a Young Writer

MAXINE KUMIN

Dear Eager One:

As you are now, so once was I, for starters. And I, too, devoured Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, so hungry for scraps of encouragement and solace that I committed whole paragraphs to memory. I still carry around with me "works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing so little to be reached as with criticism" and "await with deep humility and patience the birth-hour of a new clarity." *Letters* is a kind of breviary to be borne in your backpack and taken out from time to time when the hopelessness of it all assails you.

What do I mean by hopelessness? The inability of the poet ever to express to his or her satisfaction with what is taking place on the worksheet. The finished poem is found wanting by its creator; it never quite fulfills the writer's expectation, even though it goes out in the world, perhaps gets chosen for inclusion in an important anthology, ends up being studied by undergraduates who must then write a paper about it, and so on.

Pay no attention to the siren song of some would-be poets who claim they write only for themselves. Be honest. Does a composer write a violin/piano sonata only for him/herself? Is it a sonata truly until it is played? Of course you want your poems to be published—you will move heaven and earth with your multiple submissions to see your work on the sanctioned, printed page.

The main thing is to follow your star. While you are working on your own sheaf, keep an open mind. Broaden your framework by reading outside the single constellation of poetry; read history, geology, medical dissertations, ancient history. Reread—for surely you have a solid grounding in the poetry of past centuries—Donne and Herbert, Blake and Smart, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, as well as Moore, Millay, Bogan, Bishop, Plath, and Rukeyser. Set yourself the task of memorizing one poem of the masters every week. Put these into your memory bank in case you are arrested as a case of mistaken identity and go to jail until the authorities are satisfied you are not a spy. This may take a long time. These poems will sustain you in your miserable cell.

A. E. Housman is easy to learn by rote, as he used lockstep meters, usually iambic tetrameter, and full rhymes to express his lovely lonely pessimism and sorrow; he will be good in prison. Yeats will be harder, but worth the struggle. Hopkins, with his delicious, quirky sprung rhythm, will be hardest, but never mind. Once you internalize a dozen good poems, their rhythms will subtly infiltrate as you scribble furiously over the next failed poem. Don't throw anything out—lines that wouldn't fit and images that fell apart may prove useful later on. Date every page and save it. You may be famous one day. If not, your progeny will pore over your worksheets and treasure the parent they find there.

Now for the hard truth. Rilke, this man we idolize, was so devoted to his work that he sequestered himself from his family for months at a time, refusing to take part in major events lest these interrupt his muse. Let's face it; he was a prime narcissist. It was a woman—Lou Andreas Salomé—who rescued him from the doldrums; made him change his given name, René, to Rainer; assigned him to a stand-up desk to improve his circulation; even ordered Quaker Oats from the United States to be shipped to Paris for his digestive tract.

Actually, oatmeal is not a bad idea. Courting your muse standing up is a useful ploy. I wish you all the luck in the world and I look forward to your first book. Courage! *Sois sage.*

## LYN HEJINIAN

### To a Young Poet

(from *The Fatalist*)

Time is filled with beginners. You are right. Now  
each of them is working on something  
and it matters. But my mother's own mother-in-law  
was often bawdy: "MEATBALLS!" she would shout  
superbly anticipating site-specific specificity  
in the future of poetry. Will this work?  
The long moment is addressed to the material world's "systems  
and embodiments" for study  
for sentience and for history. Materiality, after all, is about being  
a geologist or biologist, bread dough rising  
while four boys on skateboards attempt to fly  
spinning to a halt micromillimeters before I watch them, my attention  
rivetted  
on getting tangled and forgetting the name of the chair for example  
and the huge young man, he is covered with tattoos  
I think. Life is a series of given situations  
of which the living have to take note on site  
and the storytellers give an account as the wind

tangles the rain or the invaders take over the transmitter. The exchange of  
 ideas

constitutes a challenge to the lyric ego. And so I am reporting  
 that I was wrong. A real storyteller never asks what story one wants  
 to hear, not the happy Joel nor the sleepy  
 Clara nor the dreamy Jane, the seductive Sam, the sullen  
 and probably stupid Robbie Jones. Nonetheless  
 I have bought a bicycle. I have to remember  
 to stop. Thank you. I hope you will enjoy it. A bike that is simply locked  
 but freestanding will be immediately stolen. Of course  
 there can't be much wrong in helping people get what they want  
 but creeps and purveyors of negativity  
 and cruelty are tucked into every institution  
 and most corners. And though my inclination is to vote  
 in favor of everyone's dearest dreams of advancement, I disagree  
 with the remark that "deathlessness" and "fearlessness" don't work.  
 I think they do. "Deathlessness" immediately invokes the "breathlessness"  
 we thought

we'd halfheard in the panting of dashing deathlessness  
 heard hurrying as it lives life. "Writhing" is self-indulgent however  
 but the near-rhyme with "writing" is terrific. Don't change *that*. Poetry  
 can't be about flight—that would make flight a perching  
 instead of a flight. When one thing becomes another  
 the other is free to become something  
 else. I remember just where  
 we were sitting  
 under the influence of the wind  
 watching a crow  
 becoming something else in this case; a crow. The state of milk in jars  
 takes place and the state of world affairs  
 can now change. No cereal manufacturer intentionally includes angels  
 but marshmallow bits may look angelic. Who knows? A poem  
 full of ruptures could be one from which all kinds of things are flying.