Summons

David phoned me, a friend from our graduate years—on my land-line, which these days never rings except to herald unwanted solicitations from tele-marketeers and survey wonks. We hadn’t talked for ages, though I recalled his generous conversation and ready laugh. No time for niceties now.

‘Bob’, he began,  
‘I’m sorry to barge in on you like this, but it’s kind of urgent’.

‘Sure’, I said, not sure at all what I was loosing on myself.  
‘Good man. I must be brief. I’m being tailed’. 
‘Say what?’

‘You heard me. Security operatives. Take your pick of government agencies and creatures from the deep-state black lagoon—emphasis on goon’.

Now, back in the day, we’d swapped our scepticisms over beer about the nation’s state: the broad collapse of government into nodes of command and control, constabulary thuggery, the web of social-media rumour-mongering and febrile buy, buy retail therapies. Full-circle surveillance lurks, one size fits all, privacy pinned beneath the lidless eye. We never thought, of course, that any of it could flick our hides, but here was Dave, my pal from our glory-days of footnotes and seminars, convinced that spooks had got the drop on him. For what? He hadn’t time to say.

‘Nothing bad. I’m posting you a manuscript, is all. Still at your old address?’

‘Sure. Copley Close. Is this another unfinished novel of yours?’

While studying medieval literature, Dave was always scribbling stories and poems. None of which got him anywhere I could see, but how we waste our time is ours to choose.
‘Posting?  Why not strap it on a mule?
Couldn’t you just zap me a PDF?’
‘Spooks, like I said.  Anything digital,
they’re onto it like the flies on proverbial shit.
Snail-mail they can’t hack, believe it or not.
They’ve lost the knack of steaming open letters,
and they can’t be bothered with land-lines anymore’.
‘Sheesh, mate!  What’s it about?’

‘Just an account
of stuff I’ve been through recently.  Somehow
these humourless types took note and made of me
a person of interest.  They’re not easily bored’.
‘Aw, man, you haven’t begun to wear those tinfoil hats—’
‘Nah.  Still the same old Dave you knew back when’.
‘Should I start reading Tom Clancy?’

‘Rudolf Steiner,
more like’.

‘Anthroposophy?  Good grief!
You have put on the tin-foil hat, for sure’.
‘C’mon. You know your weirdos better than that.
You even wrote up Rudolf in that essay’.
‘But from a safe distance’.

‘Sympathetically,
it seemed to me’.

‘Some bits I found compelling.
And plenty others made me shake my head’.
‘Never mind. You don’t have to read it.
Just take the manuscript to anyone
who might be willing to give the thing a look’.
‘I haven’t published anything in years.
I don’t know much about the business now’.
‘There’s nothing you need to know.  I’m pretty sure
it’ll make its own way, once you give it a push’.
‘Dave, this makes no sense.  If you’re concerned
that this is a matter of interest to certain parties—’
‘Just try. That’s all I’m asking’.

‘Why can’t you?’

‘It’s tricky. If I start to correspond
with publishers, they’ll notice, and that’ll be that.
Besides, I’m gonna be on the move a bit.
An obscure poet like you, on the other hand—’
‘—gee, thanks! —’

‘—can pester publishers and not
attract too much attention. Or so I hope.
Oh, and another thing’.

‘Why not? What else?’
‘You’ve got to pretend you wrote it’.

‘Get out of here!’

‘It can’t be mine. Pretend you made me up.
Add to the text if you like, just leave my bits
more or less the way they are. Once you
turn me into a fictional character,
there’s not much they can do about what I say.
They’re not big fans of literature’. He laughed.

But a friend is a friend, and despite the evidence
that David had begun to lose the plot,
I humoured him and said I’d do my best.
The cheeky bastard said he’d sent the thing.
Already! Had an inkling I’d come through.
I’d no idea that I was so transparent,
or maybe Dave had acquired super-powers.
But he’d called me right, and when the thing arrived,
I left it on the table for a day,
strangely anxious about what it might hold.
But like the curious cat (or maybe Pandora)
I couldn’t resist the urge to take a peek.
Long-hand manuscript, in David’s minuscule,
influenced by Carolingian,
which he’d fallen in love with in palaeography class.
Calligraphy pen. Legible, at least.
I read the whole of the day and into that night.
And by the time the eastern sky grew pink,
I knew the sun would light a different world
than the one it shone on for me yesterday.
I saw Dave’s point. I did as he had asked
and haven’t heard a word from him since then.
I’ve tipped a few bits in to clarify
obscurities that I could help explain.
David knew I’d get it in the end.
For better or worse, the result sits in your hands.
What you make of it now is up to you.