

THINGS IN THE BOX

By Amy Bernstein

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... everything that is bad for you is so easy to get too, twist cap open a liquor bottle pop the top on a beer can, light a cigarette but try to rip open a bandaid when your bleeding or get an aspein when you head is pounding or a blister pack when the battery in you pace maker is dying

No prompting, no coaxing on by the auteur part Ms. really knows how to indulge just pure indulgence on the for me there is something so existential about it that I wish I had a better idea what that word means / meant I wish I knew. She reminds me of Rosencranz and Guildenstern rolled up and unraveled into one person. or what the butler saw theatre of the absurd

*Bakelite Museum, Williston, Somerset, England Leo Baekeland family was crazy
(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

THINGS IN THE BOX

1,630 words

A Performance Prose Poem

1.

If I can find the box, with all the things inside, then I will be OK.

If I can find the box, with all the things inside, then I will know I was right.

All the things inside the box were put there a long time ago and I need to find them, finger them, rub them, put them in my palm, and then everything will be OK. And I will know the reasons why.

I did not lose the box, but it got lost. Time is a muscled arm that has pushed me away from the box and it from me. I was not strong enough to push back.

I regret that, deeply. But isn't that just like people: regretting most the things we can help least.

-Don't you have work to do?

-I do, but finding the box is more important.

-They won't keep you on, if you don't do the work.

-But I am spinning inside a whorl.

-This box of yours is an excuse.

-No, it's the thing itself.

- Try walking around the block.

I remembered, while leaving sleeping for waking. Once I remembered, my head filled with 'box.' Box is both box and key—to everything that comes after and came before.

And the things inside the box.

And isn't that just like people, telling you to stop making excuses but they have it all wrong because the excuses are the necessities.

I leave the work behind. I have to.

Where where where is the box?

I learn what I know between sleeping and waking. The box is in the old house, inside the cubby in the wall in the basement—

—the cubby with the amber Bakelite knob—

—the cubby that sticks so you must tug on the knob with both hands.

I will go back to the house, to the basement, to recover the box, recover my bearings, get right with gravity and all the forces keeping me tethered.

I will go back to the undiscovered country.

That is the plan.

But that is not how it goes.

I go to the place where the house stood and the house is gone. The land is levelled flat. The basement, the cubby in the wall with the amber knob, the box, and the things in the box, are somewhere else—

--if anywhere.

How did I not know the house was gone?

Who hid that from me?

Who took the box that was meant for me?

If I do not have the box, and cannot find it, does it exist?

Do I?

I cannot go on without the box and the things inside the box. I will fall down. I will fall away. I will crack and splinter like the amber Bakelite knob itself must have cracked and splintered when the house came crashing down around it.

And the box too.

And me too.

I will spend all my time, now, looking for another box, and things to put inside it. And a house to enfold the box—to weigh it down with the weight of my intentions and the bottomless weight of my need.

2.

They left me a box with things in it. Just a fucking box with some things in it. What things? Whose things? Who said I wanted those things? What good are they, to me?

I looked at the things only once, a long time ago, the first time someone put the box in my hands. I was looking down at the floor. I saw only a pair of wrists and cuffs.

Bits and pieces. Hard shapes. Soft shapes. Things with colors. Things that are black. Things with writing. Things tipped in blood.

--Here you go.

--What is it?

--It's yours now.

--But what is it?

--It was theirs, but now it's yours. That's how we keep going. Isn't it marvelous?

I drag that fucking box everywhere. Like Marley and his chain. I hide it under the sink, behind the pipes. I hide it under the eaves in the attic. I hide it from my dreams.

I forget what the box looks like. I forget what's in it. I forget where I put it.

I grow older. I grow old.

No, I never forgot the fucking box and the things inside it. I lied the whole time, about all of it, about everything.

The box is me. I am the box. The bits and pieces are my flesh and bone and blood.

I await the fucking transmigration of souls....

Any moment...

Now.

--Ahh, here you go. It's *your* fucking box now. Get it out of my sight before I kill someone.

3.

I found this box on the street. The box was lying face-down, wide open, angry as shit. The thing cursed me up and down.

Oh, no. I'm not having this. I gotta get you inside, off the street, teach you a lesson.

I get the box inside and put it on my kitchen table. I shut its mouth, to stop the cursing. A brass hinge is missing. I can fix that. But I already know this fucking box won't show me any gratitude.

I open the box to fix the hinge and the box just lays into me, nonstop.

--You go low, I go high, I tell the box. That's how it's got to be.

I'm keeping it, anyway. I don't have a box like this, made of wood, with inlaid ivory and twisty carvings. The perfect size for small things:

My lucky rabbit's foot.

My folding poison-dart gun.

My fake passport.

My wad of counterfeit twenties.

A lock of my mother's hair, wrapped in a scrunchie.

Why is it always this fucking way? I should have *always* had a place for my shit. I shouldn't have to go walking down the street to find just the right fucking box for my shit.

Somebody else's garbage shouldn't be my treasure. I shouldn't have to go looking for my own treasure. I shouldn't have to stumble upon it by chance.

Why didn't somebody give me a box just like this a long time ago? Why is that so fucking hard? Why does the easy shit always turn out to be the hard shit?

Anyway!

The box knows who's who. I set us both straight. I keep it right there, on the kitchen table. My box knows I got eyes on the back of my head. That shit ain't moving unless I say so.

4.

You have erased me.

I never ordered a box with things in it. I'd never order a box this ugly: wood inlaid with ivory and defaced with twisty carvings. If I *had* ordered a box, my box would be white on the outside and lined with brown mink on the inside.

And *my* box would arrive empty.

Instead, an ugly box I never ordered shows up at my door.

I reject this box.

I reject all of *you* for sending the box.

You: the industrial kleptomaniacs who have erased me.

I would smash the box with a hammer and then burn the splinters to ashes, but I won't, I can't, because then I'd be complicit in your major fuck-up.

You set this in motion—my erasure.

You've taken everything from me and replaced me with a goddamn box.

You've taken my identity. Phone numbers. Bank digits. Shoe size. Hair dye formula. Dental records. Fingerprints. Library card. The shape of the dent in the pillow on my bed.

You have scooped me hollow and left me for dead, with a box, and the things in the box still cocooned in bubblewrap.

I don't know how I will get back at you, or when, but I will find a way. One day, when you least expect it, you'll open your door and find a box with things in it, and you will never know another moment's peace.

5.

Grace. Grace. Grace.

Formless and expectant,

Confining and boundless,

I have no idea what grace is or does or if it is an equal-opportunity employer.

Today, I take grace under my own wing.

Today, I decide that grace is shaped like a box with things in it.

And I decide:

This is not *my* box. It is *our* box.

What's in our box? Let's see.

Well, that's odd. Our box is empty. It is as heavy as a rock settled on the ocean floor and yet it is empty.

Our box is a void, a hollow, a concavity...a depravity, a wanting, a hunger, a dark night of the soul. *Our* soul.

An empty box, once filled, is fulfilled: bliss achieved, nirvana attained. Only then, then will we contain multitudes.

What things will we put in our box?

The seven plagues, the seven wonders, the holy trinity, Paradise Lost, Leaves of Grass?

The curl and spike of a buck's antler?

The last cry heard on the street?

A sprig of baby's breath?

Proof that the Devil walks among us?

The alpha and the omega...

We are not able to choose. We were not sent out into this life to find all the things of grace that are meant to fill an empty box.

We are woefully, drastically, tragically, comically unprepared to put the things in our box that will matter.

We don't know what grace looks tastes smells feels like.

We are blind to grace's true appearance, without which, our box is merely an idea and not a shape that holds objects in space and time.

We will keep searching.

Until then, our box is not a box. Things destined for the box are not things but only memories scattering like beads scurrying through time.

We wait.

6.

Here I am.

There you are.

And only a box between us.

THE END

THE POET SPEAKS: *Because I often find that the human condition requires me to place words in a different order as the only way to get at, into, onto, in front of, and behind what is really going on at any given moment.*

Because only poetry performs like a river into which one can never step twice.

Because I am so wildly ignorant of the canon that I can compose in my own image and do whatever the hell I want.

Even the quietest poems are screaming, and right now, I feel like screaming all the time

AUTHOR’S BIO: Amy L. Bernstein writes about the intersection of politics and culture for the stage and the page. Her novel, “Ell,” will be published by Scarsdale Publishing. Selected short plays are published by Routledge and Leicester Bay Theatricals, and short fiction by Flying Ketchup Press. Poetry has appeared with Passaic/Voluspa. She is a 2014 recipient of a Ruby Artist Award from the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance. Visit her at www.amywrites.live