

*Box*

by Robert Wrigley

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Review by Lex Runciman

You still see them occasionally, in antique stores: empty compositor's trays, row on row of carefully niched rectangles, open boxes that once held individual lead characters necessary to hand printing – those Ps and Qs we still sometimes hear that we're supposed to mind. Or you'll see a tea chest – a set of small drawers in ranks, four or five across. Or maybe it's an apothecary's chest that once held vials and powders, each in its own place, in two halves that piano-hinge closed in the middle. Robert Wrigley's new book, *Box*, puts one in mind of such other boxes. His *Box* makes a large container, one that holds within it many observations and wonders, each in its own niche or drawer or purpose-built shelf, each carefully separate yet each also contributing to a larger purpose, just as each letter is needed to make an alphabet, just as each tea has its taste and each medicine its curative effect.



Robert Wrigley is Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at the University of Idaho, having retired from teaching this spring. His new book of poems, *Box*, is now available.

If these poems were prose, we might call many of them essays, in that they often address an implied question. Often these questions engage large issues of relationships – the relation of son to father, the relation of lover to lover, the relation of one human to an aspen grove, or, what it would be to live as a lichen, or what happens when a deer dies. In that last case, the process of decomposition is also an extended occasion for the satisfaction of various literal hungers (of ravens, coyotes, maggots, etc.) and, ultimately the satisfaction of the artistic hunger that prompts the human speaker to retrieve a now entirely defleshed skull and hang it as a talisman on an outside wall. In this sort of Wrigley poem, the lines are almost always made in stanzas, the line lengths often long enough to shade towards prose, though their internal construction shows a concentration of phrasing and content denser, more satisfying, in that way only fine poems can be. Here, for example, is the last stanza of the book's opening poem, "My People":

They would not know what to make of this work  
I do, which would not seem to them like work at all.  
Three years ago, I rolled my father's wheelchair  
to the grave of his namesake, Great-Uncle Arvil.  
Ninety-two, with Parkinson's, my father didn't say much  
but said, as he always said, "Shit I hate that name."

Against these essayistic and masterfully rhetorical poems, Wrigley includes narrative moments of perception become uncommon precisely because in Wrigley's language they assert themselves as at once

remarkable and essential. To summarize such narratives is to trivialize them. And to make them over point by point into words, Wrigley knows, is an effort at once compelling and doomed, hence, "A Few Items at This Moment," which includes, "There are a few items / at this moment no one in the world knows / but me, and I choose not to say them." Nevertheless, it's often a poet's wish (or compulsion) to try to make experience over into words good enough that they make a new experience kindred to the original, faithful to its heft and feel. Wrigley knows that fact (for example, 'I sat with my dog') is not the point; rather, it's the emotional, thoughtful fullness that might – if the language is right – invest a few moments with, in this case, the tender presence and essence of the human-animal bond.

In poems like "Proust," in parts of "Mother Country," and most surely in an extended series of poems set in Italy, in Assisi, the momentary and fleeting becomes a persistence of value and instruction. Among these, "S. Francesco" stands out. It speaks of a "pigeon potentate" observed "in the midst of his preening and posturing," with other lesser pigeons "perched not upon the chimney top / but arrayed as vassals around." And it is in this precise posturing moment that we see this lord of pigeons "seized by a kestrel or small hawk": "a poof of feathers and dust - / then gone." A poem like this one sets a question rather than answering it: judge the pigeon or judge the hawk? The poem's last lines invoke St. Francis, "who without reservation also loved them both."

*Box* is Robert Wrigley's eleventh book. It shows him deeply at home in the mountain West, a landscape he understands as land, air, water, weather all shared with a wideness of wild ecology he investigates and observes as a form of love. He's in his sixty's now, which means he has shaken hands with mortality more than once and walked away. Beguiled as ever by the every-day (what else do we have?), he wants also to confront the big, hard mysteries, including the question of what one leaves behind. *Box* is animated by a determination to make language of such beauty in its construction, such music in its utterance, and such clarity in its import that it transforms the transitory and the lost into a poetry that insists on experience at once animate, surprising, deeply valued, elusive, and kept. In *Box*, poem after poem turns such wish to fact.



