

The Lascaux bin

I had a sudden memory of a waste paper bin.

A metal one about 18 centimetres high and 20 in diameter, tapering slightly to the base. **It is made** of a thin metal printed with a reproduction of palaeolithic paintings - I think from the Lascaux caves in France. I had one in my room as a teenager in the 1960's. They were made by the Metal Box Factory in Mansfield, where I grew up. They were everywhere. The company was a big employer and it seemed everyone in town knew someone who worked there and got them cheap "seconds" – bins, planters, biscuit tins, trays. They were all printed using a photo-litho process that I was fascinated by (though I didn't know the name or how it was done): there was something so beautiful about the photographic surface intimately entangled with an object's form. It couldn't be flatter or more pictorial but it couldn't be more three-dimensional. Couldn't be more of a *thing*. Its utter smoothness confounded the idea of texture by being so perfect.

So I "had a sudden memory" of this object; why this thing at this time? I wonder now whether this particular object chose to re-enter my life at this point. Even now, just a few days afterwards I can't quite remember why I thought about so slight and seemingly insignificant a piece of mass-produced homeware .

But I did and I did the obvious and googled *Metal Box Company cave art waste bin mid-century*. I found half-a-dozen listed and bought one from Ebay for £16.00. It turned up pretty quickly. Opening up the parcel and actually handling the thing was a surprisingly intense experience. This modest object tore a little hole in the fabric of space-time so a bit of 1967 was lodged in 2023 but anchored, fixed where (or rather when) it came from. If I turn and look at it now, next to my desk on the right it feels like someone cut a picture out of an old magazine and held it in front of me as a crude SFX.

I couldn't shake the absurd idea that this was actually *mine*. The one I had had and had remembered. it wouldn't have surprised me if bits of 1967's rubbish turned up in there – torn sheets from a foolscap pad with rejected drafts of English homework, a chocolate wrapper, a grubby Elastoplast, empty fountain pen cartridges, a stub of pencil too short to use, a worryingly damp tissue, pieces of plastic sprue from an Airfix kit, a squeezed-out tube of glue. I'd have said that we threw out a lot less than we do now but maybe it was (mostly) just different.

I've shared my space with a lot of things since that time; I'm not sure how accurate it is to say I've "owned" them because a lot of them seem to have an agenda of their own and just drift in and out of my purview. Its easy to credit supposedly inanimate objects with some kind of innate will or desire to exist and to carry on existing: Spinoza did, he called it *Conatus*. Thinking about that made this slightly worn and scarred little entity seem rather heroic.

So, what if there's a story here?

The morning of day after it arrived I pulled up the chair up to my desk and looked down at new (old) bin with its hulking bison and its leaping ochre horse with a scribble of spiky black mane. There was a piece of paper in there, folded carefully with my name written on it – in capital letters, blue biro. Odd, because I'd not done any work there for a few days and nobody else had been in but me. The writing was a bit familiar - not a child's but still just that bit careful and under control. I unfolded it..

On the other side, the lines of typed letters slightly out of step with the ruled lines of the paper, was a letter from my 16-year-old self...

No.

No, too many problems. If that was my 16-year-old self how come I didn't remember it? I mean, I was a dozy kid but I wasn't amnesiac. Some arbitrary time-travel rule about forgetting would have to be invented. That or I'd be evoking the Multiverse and I really wouldn't want to be having to deal with that as a plot device.

In the end I'm sure it's enough to describe this plucky survivor of the past 54 years standing modestly by my desk and reminding me of how sublime very ordinary things can be.

Dear Person In The Future,

I hope you are well. I don't really know where you are or who you might be. I think I'd like it most if you were me but in The Future. But if you are me then you'll know what I've written because you'll remember doing it. You'll remember that I wrote this. If you're reading it now you'll know what I did with it – where I put it so it would get to you. I haven't worked that out yet though. Whatever I do with it there's a chance it'll just get thrown away or if I hide it well enough to stay there till the Future then nobody will find it. I suppose if I just keep it then however long it is till I read it again it will always be me-in-The Future that reads it. Everything travels in Time, after all. It just travels forwards. So there's always a chance this gets to you - travelling by staying still. That's quite a strange idea. Actually I told my friend Jenny about it and she said it was very Zen. Like the sound of one hand clapping. She lent me her copy of The Dharma Bums. But you know that, of course, because you are me in the future and you'll just remember all this. If I put this letter somewhere it's you that will read it.

In the future: Will I marry Jenny? Will I be an artist? Will I live in America or somewhere like that? will there be a Third World War? Will England be communist? I don't expect you'll ever be able to write back and tell me unless someone invents Time Travel. But you must know the answers by now...