

First Draft: a Conjuring Trick

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Lords, ladies, gentlemen, and others,
observe this simple sheet of paper;
one side's blank, the other
bears the first draft of a poem —
I blush, but it is mine.

I read it to you (note that I have nothing
up my sleeves), and feel the glow of
authorship. It flows well, makes its point,
draws elegantly to a close;
see how alliteration and internal rhyming
glisten in the reader's mind, and how
the images feel natural yet new.

Now see this box; examine it for secret
panels, hidden cavities, false bottom.
Look, I rap each side in turn, I flip it over,
'til you're satisfied that it's an ordinary box.

I drop the first draft of my poem
gently in. Observe it there —
it lies face up for all to see.
And now I need a volunteer to help me
with the locks, to guarantee that all is
as it seems. The box is sealed, the only key
is placed within the Bank of England's vaults.
And now we wait.

A month goes by, the box in unrestricted view;
six months, six more. That should suffice.
The vault is opened, key transported here,
the box unlocked, and there's the sheet of paper
with the poem as it was a year ago.

I read it out, but what is this?
The metre limps, rhymes jar, alliteration's
too obtrusive; all the images are stale and tired,
or forced and artificial. The poem blunders to a close,
and leaves the reader blushing with embarrassment.

You gasp, astonished, try to work out
how the trick was done.
Then, pausing only to remove a rabbit from my hat,
I bow and leave the stage, go to my dressing room,
sit down, and quietly weep.