

Ella Rose Flood
Container and last display

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Ocean 1212 W
by Alissa Bennett

I recently came across a shoebox of old things that I keep on the top shelf of a bookcase in my room, a cardboard sarcophagus stuffed with faxes and trinkets and letters, each item a reminder that we always carry the rubble of who we once were inside of ourselves. I do my best to avoid the contents of this thing, knowing as I do how unpleasant it can be to watch the past come back, roiling and rapid and uncontrollable...I guess none of us like to be reminded of what we've tried our hardest to forget. A few years ago, I felt a surge of bravery and looked inside, sifting through the detritus of my life like a prospector until I came across a decades-old love letter I'd written to someone once. The envelope had been stamped and delivered, but I could tell immediately that it had never been opened—it seemed a brutal metonym for a relationship that was probably always doomed to fail. I thought briefly about bringing this letter into a class I was teaching and allowing the students to open and read it in front of me. I guess I thought the failures of my life might somehow be transmogrified into a lesson on what archives can hold, but I lost my nerve at the last minute. It scared me, mostly because there was no way of predicting who among us the letter would expose more completely. Maybe in fifty years, it won't matter to anyone.

Toying with your own privacy is an amusing game, but toying with someone else's is usually more interesting; I've found that most people see the latter as objectionable unless the target of the inquiry is dead. In her writing on Sylvia Plath, Janet Malcolm addresses how we have culturally succumbed to an impulse that reduces the dead poet to the realm of the symbolic, how we now feel free to ransack her journals and private letters because we've turned her from a person into a container. In 2025, she's just as much a place where we can collectively regard a series of ideological conflicts about art and cruelty and erasure as she was an artist. Reading Malcolm's words, I was reminded of what it means to reconstruct a life through the lens of violation—we simply believe that we understand Plath, and our fondness for looking at her as a site of self-location fortifies our certainty that we deserve to know more. I've been thinking a lot about how visitors to her gravestone continue to cross out the Hughes that hangs off the end of her name, as though an act of redaction can somehow be restorative, as though one might court favor with a ghost who never asked for our opinion anyway. Is it vandalism or justice? An offering or a theft? It depends on who you ask. I wonder if the air smells like the ocean where she is.

A long time ago, I asked my son what he thought happened to people when they die. "They turn into tombstones," he said, which had a certain childish wisdom to it. I liked the idea that we can cast off our bodies and become monuments to ourselves, the etched rock a souvenir that marks the place where our agency has leached back into the earth, where our rights and dignity have dissolved into the dark comfort of some sort of primordial sludge. A couple of weeks ago when I showed him images of the works in Ella's show, he asked me if I'd ever heard of mummy brown, a now obsolete and definitely illegal oil paint that was produced with pigment sourced from the pulverized bodies of mummies. I hadn't heard of it, but he was right to bring it to my attention; it's really an anecdote that holds inside of itself almost everything that moves me regarding life and death and privacy, a perfect example of our human propensity for degradation. After he left my room, I read a story about how the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones buried his tubes of mummy brown in the ground and conducted a short funeral service for them when he learned what they actually contained. I guess it was both the only protection he could offer, and the only way for him to say that he was sorry.

"After we are dead," Malcolm writes, "the pretense that we might be protected against the world's careless malice is abandoned." It's a beautiful sentence because it's true, because it manages to reach into the depths of us and produce something we don't like to admit about value and robbery. I think it relates a lot to Ella's practice of probing the barricades between the public and the private, her interest in determining the exact distance between what we save and what we reject, and what it means when we help ourselves to the aftermath of someone else's life. I recently became fixated on a documentary about a mummified hand that was purportedly severed from the body of Cleopatra. Through a series of exchanges over the course of three centuries, the relic now sits in a locked metal cabinet

in some man's house in Danbury, Connecticut, where it is trotted out for film crews and television scientists, run through MRI machines and granularly inspected. The hand is a desiccated thing, a ghastly shrunk claw that reads more as horror than history when considered outside of the context of a body, and I felt a lot of empathy for it; whether it's legitimate or not, it's an awful long way from home. Regardless of the shabby set of values the object reflects, I still want very badly to see it; I wrote to the man in Connecticut, and when he didn't write back, I called. I guess I mention it here because I'm as guilty as anyone of believing that present can ever understand the past.

I think of the little valueless things collected in my box, of how Plath's life has been laid out for a public still ravenous for information that might confirm a set of biases we continue to hold for and against people long dead, of the man in Connecticut and whatever fantasies he has invested in a stranger's body part. It's maybe a strange blind date, but I believe we all belong here together, next to Ella's zipped up suitcases and her mummy perfumes and her wrapped up animals. Maybe the difference between Ella and me is that she doesn't need to open up the grave to know what's inside.

Ella Rose Flood (b. 1999, Chicago, IL) lives and works in Chicago. Selected solo and two-person exhibitions include *Reposoir* (with Dominick Di Meo), Simone Subal Gallery, New York, NY; *These are just the words you know the feeling*, Galerie Hussenot, Paris, France; *The Allotter*, in lieu, Los Angeles, CA; *Only Silver*, Lubov, New York, NY; *Memorial Universe!*, Jargon Projects, Chicago, IL; and *Forever* (with Graham Wiebe), Palazzo San Giuseppe, Polignano a Mare, Italy. Selected three-person and group exhibitions include *Modèle Vivant*, Los Angeles, CA; *Spectral Fine Arts Trust* (with Boz Deseo Garden and Graham Wiebe), Final Hot Desert, London, UK; *Dog Breath*, Stop-Gap Projects, Columbia, Missouri; Inaugural exhibition, Bodenrader, Chicago, IL; *Wanderlust*, Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA; and *Quiet, Cold*, Jargon Projects, Chicago, IL.