If You Remember, I'll Remember

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What happens to a memory when it is not being reflected upon or when its originator is no longer alive? Do memories die with their makers, or are they patient, waiting to be summoned by a new mind? These questions have taken on a different urgency for me in recent years.

It had been seven years since I last saw her. Of all the emotions I expected to feel after this time away, guilt was not one of them. After all, I had titled the piece *Your Lullaby Will Find A Home In My Head*, and I really meant it. She had a home here, and it was for keeps. As I stood there revisiting this work and considering its inclusion in this exhibition, I was reminded of an instinct I have always felt to be true: the creation of an artwork is a love affair that seems immune to time. The pairing between artist and object is so complete that the sense of an endless capacity to hold true to this connection, as well as other creative moments to come, seems easily attainable in youth. There is room for it all. But as I stood there looking at this work, which was to have the special privilege of being installed next to similarly emotionally invested portrait miniatures, I realized I was also experiencing a lesson we all face at some point: letting go. What I had not expected was that I had actually let go some time before. My sense of personal betrayal was devastating.

As you mature, the simple math of life tells you that you cannot maintain the same level of

emotion and focus at all times about every meaningful event that has occurred up to that point. Luckily, humans are wonderfully inventive when it comes to empowering objects or gestures with the ability to help carry the burden of intense memories so they can be revisited in the future on different terms. However, that was not the agreement I had come to with this object during its creation. I promised her I would *always* think about her and what it took to make her. It became clear to me that day that one aspect of making an artwork that I had overlooked is the contradiction of forming an unbreakable bond with an object and being blindsided by the realization that an inevitable separation occurred while I was living life.

Time is, of course, doing its steady work on every object ever made. This complex relationship between the maker, an emotionally invested object, and the growing distance between them is not new, only rediscovered each generation, whether by an artist, a mourner, a mother, or a soldier. This doesn't make the sting any less startling. There is a vast ocean of objects like this in the world. They are carriers of an intimacy that once mattered, but they are now unanchored from their context and creators. Like tear stains on ocean waves, the individual meaning is lost to the larger tide of unintentional disregard. Being aware of this process has altered my relationships with objects in a way I could not have predicted. This realization of the untenable level of intensity I thought I could maintain with each and every object I've made has only reinforced my faith in the power of objects to expand our capabilities of empathy and stretch our notions of responsibility through time.

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"A beauty to fatalism she intends to nurture"—I remember jotting that flash of a thought down in the margins of the liner notes of a cassette tape after hearing Sylvia Plath's voice for the first time. I had found this tape as I had found thousands of other tapes, vinyl records, and CDs in countless thrift stores, resale shops, and garage and estate sales across the country. In those dustbins, there is a lot to reflect upon about the nature of emotions, meaning, memory, and our

responsibilities to them. These discarded musical moments all meant something to someone somewhere at some time. The fact that they are in dustbins should not fool us into thinking these now silent voices were not once the soundtrack to real heartbreak and happiness. The worn-out grooves, personal notes, drawings, names in heart shapes, and dates of purchase scrawled on the covers tell a different story: life was lived here even if the people and stories will never be known to me.

I have heard Sylvia Plath recite her poems now hundreds and hundreds of time. I could easily pick her voice out of a room full of crowded people even though she has long since left this world. I have played and handled this cassette so many times that the tape itself is starting to flake off its celluloid surface, fragments of her voice settling down into the crevices of my tape player—down there with all the other singers I have slowly turned to dust. These countless rewinds are forming something I have no hesitation calling love.

The poem I keep rewinding is "November Graveyard." *Honesty* and *death* are two words and ideas that many of us will never have the bravery to reconcile, but on this decaying tape lies a guidepost. I don't imagine, even as a child, that Sylvia was any less honest or innocent about what she knew lay ahead; you don't see that clearly with a late start. After hearing her, I knew she was giving in rather than giving up.

When I hear her I imagine everyone who heard her voice on this tape before me and then even farther back, the day the sound engineer heard Sylvia as she recited these words in real time. I will never know who owned this tape before me, but we are bonded by the knowledge of what Sylvia Plath sounds like as she reflects on decay. We are carriers now of someone else's intimacy, given to the world like a gift and transformed to find meaning in our own life experiences. I like to think that this pool of people is large enough so that for every second of the day, someone somewhere is playing her voice in his or her mind's ear. Sylvia knew one day she would have to let go, and then it would be up to others.

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You will never hear it, but there is glass weeping in the backrooms of any number of museums across the planet today. A tincture of tears no one remembers shedding, drizzled on the interiors of convex curves of glass meant to protect the miniature portraits of lost children, mothers, husbands, brothers, and sisters inside. Even in their glass homes, the portraits are not fully protected from the elements. Considering many of these miniatures are composed of watercolor on ivory, those droplets overhead would form a devastating storm of erasure. It is a phenomenon known as “weeping glass” or “glass sickness,” and science tells me it is a defective feature of centuries-old glass caused by improperly formulated chemical mixtures that form tiny alkaline drops on the surface of the glass. Poetry tells me memories have found a liquid form.

Whether as science or metaphor, the transference of meaning and materials through time is an endless process. But this process needs our help; each generation has no choice but to let go of the personal attachments they have made with the objects of their affection. Now so far removed from the specific love or loss that created them, the miniatures in this exhibition reinforce the inevitably of letting go. They are also reminders that we let go with the hope others will grab hold. These objects ask very human, moral questions: What right do we have to forget? What do we owe to each other’s memories?

There are small pockets of teams across the globe that lose sleep over these questions. It is a unique place where memory, meaning, materials, and responsibility converge. The very human desire to want to slow the tide of erosion is confronted daily by the conservator through the chemistry of decay, the historian by reclaiming original context and knowledge, and by the contemporary artist who must argue why the past still matters today. This will always be an imperfect science. History’s complexity is due in part to its fragility. There will always be some

gaps, some wounds that can't be mended. This small team may labor away, but ultimately it will be up to all of us, the viewers, to finish this work of historical repair.

At some point all "living" history turns into "official" history. As I write this, there are only eighteen people still alive who were born in the nineteenth century. The last living World War I veteran passed away a little over a year and a half ago. With 600 to 800 World War II veterans dying each day, it is estimated that we will have lost them all by 2036. This loss is important to reflect upon. There is a mostly invisible, ignored, incredibly fragile line in the sand that is constantly trailing us, the living. This line is the difference between existing and being forgotten. When we lose the last surviving link to a moment, we lose something irreplaceable: memories shared in the first person. We should never underestimate the value these particular memories hold.

In a sense, these miniatures hold the line. They don't let the living off the hook. Something crucial happens once our bodies and the memories they carry cross this line, leaving the objects we invested with love and loss stationed in the land of the living. Responsibility shifts. In a way the objects ask something even more demanding of those remaining than what they were asked to do at the time of their creation. They ask us to change our relationship with time. They ask us to stretch our abilities of empathy beyond what we thought capable. The individual bonds that birth these types of objects into our world inevitably erode, but a generational collaboration against erasure grows in their place, rooting us in a dimension of time longer than our own lives. They appeal to our common humanity—that we have all, or will someday, lose someone we love. When that day comes, these objects will remain, monuments to letting go but also to holding on. They serve to remind us that there will always be space to add our own objects. So this is the agreement we make with each other through time: if you remember, I'll remember.

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That initial reaction of guilt after seeing my early work has evolved. My sense of betrayal still hurts deeply, but it is the kind of hurt that insists on expansion. Letting go is not washing your hands of the issue. Letting go is paradoxically about connection because it reminds us of the stakes we all have in each other's lives to pick up and carry forward. Just as Sylvia Plath understood, or the souls that populate the portrait miniatures knew, there is no guarantee the future will remember the details. But it's this uncertainty anchored to hope that binds us. The promise of total permanence will likely remain unfulfilled, but the promise that we keep trying to remember for each other's sake can be accomplished.

Your Lullaby Will Find A Home In My Head