

# MARY MARY



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## CATHY

"[T]he flower has the feature of forever shattering into scores of specified surfaces," Elaine Scarry writes—shatteringly, specifically—in her essay "Imagining Flowers: Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)." Scarry's subtitle is gleaned from a laconic John Ashberry line: "Now, / About what to put in your poem-painting," the poet notes. "Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium." That old, forever subject, flowers. "Sally, I think I'll buy the flowers myself," etcetera. What is their power, strange shudder, for writers and artists (as for others)? Not a real question—and yet. The subject's spell and pull ("to frame flowers," you write, over and over) does not dissipate, perhaps because of, rather than in spite of, their succinct temporal order. That is, their beautiful gift and attendant death. *Memento mori*, etcetera. Forget the vagaries and vicissitudes of time, though, if just for a moment. The way they flower, bloom and brittle. Instead: What is a gift? What is a gift of flowers? And what does it mean to receive? Life, yes, but what else. You might try to glean something from the following narrative (taken from life, like flowers from a grave): At the end of the year, Cathy brings the artist's family a bunch of hyacinths. The artist puts the flowers in water in a vase, which she places on a table in her kitchen. In that order. On the last day of the year—a day that is like a river, that border, or some dark threshold, its liquid brink and watery inception—the artist takes a photograph "in response to the light" in her kitchen at a "particular moment." A portrait of Cathy (nowhere to be seen), a still life of flowers, a domestic document: the black-and-white photograph appears like—what—like a photograph. Spectral, shattering. Of flowers. Diffused light, as though through a scrim, like an intake of breath, swallows the central floral object.

One pale flower falls forward in the frame (too much water, perhaps), over the tight lip of the vase. It is a kind of body, loose, relaxed, intoxicated (by itself, you imagine, so perfumed), or its parts: phallic, then female, so soft and smooth in its switching. Lean stem, then the rush of the bulb, a mouth or mound of petals. Time is a gift on the last day of the year, you think. It is a flower. It is some "feature of forever" shattering into "scores of specified surfaces." Each petal a point adding up to some score, slurred then sober. All your temporal tinctures. The flower on film presents another specific surface, yes. Another desire: scrim, breath. You imagine the time before the image: Cathy, her gift, her body offering this body, its bouquet, that fragrant and voluptuous rush. You imagine the artist's family receiving it. Putting this body in water. Watching the flowers drink and fade and fall for it. Noting the light and the light changing. Feeling time. Knowing it is time to take a photograph. Flowers swallowed by light, the last day of the year, falling forward into what.

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# MARY MARY



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## AILEEN

You are looking at a photograph of tulips, streaked and leaked with light. A kind of illuminated erasure centers the image, almost crossing out the bulbs, their heroic, voluptuous reach. A banana peel, like some cursive sign, an ornate, inexplicable typography, is scripted on the table below the vase; nearby a postcard is dropped, left, loosed. The tulips spread out, reaching for some other, larger light (that might not erase them). Pale cables loop out from frame's corners (we are in the present). Tulips, her favorite; the flowers are a gift to the artist from her mother. We are in the "atmosphere of gift," per Mauss. Here, in this atmosphere, its certain mood, "recognizing the gifts of the land and female spirits by giving back and sharing establishes a specific form of circulation," writes Rauna Kuokkanen. "In gift reciprocity and mutuality, the ultimate goal is to secure the physical, social and spiritual well-being of the individual, community and the entire social order." Or, as the artist writes: "It turns out people bring me tulips... which I love. 'Aileen' are from my mother around my birthday. There was a little light leak on that roll of film." Time is a shadow, or its inversion, crossing an image (perhaps). The slight pressure of some erasure (its light). What are tulips? Tulips originally grew on the steppes of Central Asia; their name derives from a Persian word for turban. So showy, their heavy heads, so formal. On paper or on—what—silk. The artist's photographs of gifted flowers, her oblique portraits of family and others, also appear as digital prints on silken fabric, each toned in a different fruit juice: "pomegranate, cherry, purple grape," the artist writes. To tone a photographic print on paper is to stabilize it; to tone an image on silk with fruit juice is a destabilizing agent. The silk is porous; it drinks the fruit down. It becomes not just surface but a ripening object. You are reminded of

the gendered myths of women—Eve, Persephone—and the fruit (apple, pomegranate) that brought them down, or that brought them desire (both). This crossing over—down to a river, down to one's desire, "down" as the theory and trajectory of her gender—is thus explored by the artist via the materials within the images and the materials of the work itself. This silk image of tulips, for example, is hung from charred and blackened branches. Meanwhile, a frame of tulip wood is framing another image somewhere nearby. Subject matter as framing material, to put it plainly. Fruit as subject or hunger or material, as some circulating, nourishing, desiring, destabilizing agent. As that which becomes fruitful, put to use, generates, satiates, perhaps destroys. But what of the images themselves? What is circulating in images of cut flowers, a genre at once immediately familiar to every viewer (the Dutch still life, modernist painting, early photography, etcetera), and affectively new, in every iteration? And what do such arrangements testify to of the interior? One's own, and others? "There is no occasion which cannot be suggested by the manner in which the flowers are arranged," it has been written of ikebana, from further east. The occasion of the celebration of a birth, for example, its yearly refrain. A vase, some light, a table, a daughter, her mother. The social field of the still life, refracted by the conditions and constellation of its making: a birthday, a gift, a maternal order, a bouquet of flowers. The choreography of the familial table, its affective objects. A simple gesture, seismic gift. Some leaked light. Some feeling—its bright then brittle bloom—not soon erased.

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## PAW PRINT

What does a dog do? It plays. It mourns. It waits. It walks. It gives you its paw. Ardent, loyal, ludic, lucid. It does not seem to record—dogs appear forever in the present in their emotional life—but it is recorded. In historical Flemish painting of women in domestic settings (where else would they be within the frame of art history), small dogs placed at women's feet symbolized fidelity. The artist's dog here (we might call it hers, no, caught as it is by her camera) is walking out of that frame, its small paw print impressed in Roman terracotta the only trace of its movement, its life, its fidelity to some woman (or man or not). Images practice fidelity and not. In their practice and capture of the momentary and their long material stretch into the future, photographs ask: What is loyalty, and to what, to whom? To what kinds of bodies, subjects, objects? Each image a small dog (perhaps), its trace left and impressed within some frame. The archaeological artifact that is her subject the artist found in The McManus Museum in Dundee. The delicate terracotta tile was unearthed from the Carpow Roman Fort in Abernethy; the shape of an arrowhead, it offers a footprint of a dog who, centuries ago, moved across its clay surface as it was drying, leaving only this cogent, palpable impression. The very lack of a body a record left for those to find later—a kind of spectral, inverted reliquary. Not relief but its opposite (you think). You look: The terracotta appears like a crack in the firmament. Some slice of life excavated. Some smooth skin: freckled, porous, impressed. But there are other dogs, other bodies: This writer's mother had a small ceramic tile featuring a Flemish dog that she found in a thrift store in California, no woman in its tight ceramic frame. Just the slight animal body leaping at some invisible heel. The tile is the writer's now, placed on the mantle of her

Athens apartment. She sent an image of it to the artist in Glasgow. Matter and material is memory, some communication, a kind of letter sent across cities, countries, the present, into the future, offering impressions and gifts of the most fleeting of gestures. Dogs are a good conduit to such material, you would think. Virginia Woolf thought so. "He nosed his way from smell to smell; the rough, the smooth, the dark, the golden," she wrote in *Flush*, her "biography" of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog. "[H]e ran in and out, always with his nose to the ground, drinking in the essence; or with his nose in the air vibrating with the aroma. He slept in this hot patch of sun—how sun made the stone reek! he sought that tunnel of shade—how acid shade made the stone smell!" Dog and mineral and material; trace as image, clay as movement. Photograph as relic and return. Time as something substantial, unspeakable, impressionable, light-writ, incensed. "Been thinking again of a Virginia Woolf quote I used as a title for a previous show: 'Granite and Rainbow,'" the artist writes. "This crossroads between something that seems so fleeting in a substance so solid, so ancient."

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## CURTAIN

What is an image but a curtain, a shade being drawn. Open or closed is the question. Here, diffused light fills the vertical folds like a set of waves on some body of water, extending into the distance, coming to shore, or the refrain of a horizon repeated. Some temporal order that stretches forward and back, some long, pale shore made vertical. Or the image is simply a curtain, hung in the window of a new home, new light. "The curtains are in the bedroom in the new flat. They have a kind of weave and sheen, which is super photogenic," the artist writes. She writes that she spends her time nursing her young daughter staring at these curtains. She likes their liminal quality: some gauzy threshold between inside and outside, between "doing something and doing nothing." The resulting silver gelatin print is small, perhaps suggesting the discretion of the domestic, some private order. Absence in presence, etcetera. The image is all ground, suspended, illuminated, ambient; it is time as material. It is a surface—ample but not surfeit, thin but not transparent—for the projection of thinking, of feeling, of generating a kind of meaning (that genre without genre). The curtain is not language but a space for language's becoming and unbecoming, a kind of page (in the book of the house). You stop, change tactics, move away from language, all its associations. Because curtains also suggest a stage, the corporeal gesture: something theatrical, artificial, formal. Curtains suggest, too, the domestic: something intimate, familial. Certainly here. You back up, though. You begin to scroll through the illuminated curtains and surfaces and windows of the Internet. You read: "By the first decade of the 20th century, art photographers like Baron Adolf de Meyer employed soft-focus lenses and painterly darkroom techniques to make

photographs that resembled drawings and prints. The vogue at the time was to produce images that reflected a handcrafted approach." You look at one of De Meyer's still life images (of branches), and then its caption: "Here, De Meyer photographed an arrangement of objects through a scrim. The pattern of thin, woven fabric softens the backlit objects and helps replicate the subtle tonal effects prized in etchings and aquatints." You look back at the artist's own *Curtain*, its own thin, woven fabric and subtle tonal effects. You think about photographs across centuries, about light across centuries, crossing tables, focuses, textiles, fortunes, families. Some curtain of the mind opens and closes. Everywhere, though, curtains cross over, along the frame and fashion of all their disparate meanings, conditions, theories, associations, genres, aesthetic and domestic enterprises. Some scrim flooded by light, the material a kind of camera, a monitor, a monochrome, a page, some mind (in time). Her privacy. You stare at the *Curtain* as you might an inexplicable expanse: a body of water or a pale stone wall rising like a wave, or some sensitive chemical surface, with its disruptions of light, folds of shadow. You think: The image describes the image you don't see, all the moments behind and in front of it. The image describes itself without debt, it offers itself—what—without. "The light's refraction on the sea makes the stone wall tremble. I'm someone. I'm the one who called, who screamed, in the white light: desire," Marguerite Duras recites in her film *Les mains négatives*. Then: "The word isn't yet created."

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## CAPITOLINE SCENE

Object, plinth; object, plinth. Fragments both. An enormous hand—punctured, amputated—raised in supplication or address, affixed to a smooth, rectangular marble plinth, pale and veined and rich. The bronze, bruised hand a kind of glove one might slip off, like time itself (not exactly). Like a hand. It is the colossal paw of Constantine in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, though it might be an infant's hand rising against the vast field of her mother's breast. Size is instructive but not total, no? "All hands have the same size," Marguerite Duras writes. Behind the raised hand of Constantine, in the photograph, is a globe, also resting on a plinth, a sphere that was originally held in the larger sculpture's palm. A colossal bronze reduced to fragments constellated in a room in Rome. Light against stone. Bronze against marble. Aesthetic time against geological time, etcetera. The fragmented sculpture has been in the museum's collection since its founding in 1471—one of the first public museums in Europe. The early fourth-century bronze statue of Emperor Constantine was 12-meters high. You imagine this height. You look at the remaining fragments: an enormous head, that sphere, left forearm and hand, part of the middle and the index fingers. In the artist's image, light crosses the hand, then the floor: inky, irregular shadows of fingers, geometric shadows stretching away from the plinths, scripting the floor with their dark. The light is a fleeting element of the object-sculpture; it will leave the scene. This photograph is its record. The artist writes that she was thinking about Duras's *Les mains négatives*, and the film's elliptical query into the ancient handprint drawings in caves dating from the Magdalenian age. "Thinking about the hand in relation to instinct," she artist writes, "to something non-verbal, human at its most basic."

At its most basic a photograph is a moment formalized, made material, manifested: light on stone, chemical to paper. At its most basic, this Roman scene, the artist's photograph, is an image of objects, but an image can also be an object. Don't object—try to see this. A hand, a sphere, some plinths, this light, some smell, a surface, some chemical, an emperor, a man, an empire, an institution, its stage, some ruin, an artist, and time—its dark pool—leaking throughout, a kind of aether or ocean air. Duras recites: "The man came alone in the cave in front of the ocean. All hands have the same size. He was alone." Then: "He looked at the breadth of things, in the roar of the wave, the breadth of his strength ... He stays in the center of the stone, hallways, stone everywhere. You, who has a name, who has an identity, I love you with an indefinite love." Constantine's enormous hand (punctured, amputated), its breadth, its strength, remains—where—within the frame of a photograph, within the frame of a name, on a plinth of stone, within our attention, that love, and without.

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## STONE WITH LIGHT LEAK

A standing stone rises on Machrie Moor on Arran, an island off the West Coast of Scotland that the artist has visited throughout her life. Machrie Moor has four enormous upright stones, but this one in red sandstone stands on its own; the others form their own circle. The solitary stone like an enormous, ancient hand raised in alarm or greeting or—what—vulnerability. Its sheer size, its strange intimacy, some allegory for ceremony and power if not the powerful, and how they might fall, suggests a proto-sculpture setting the stage for the colossal hand of Constantine in the Capitoline. Perhaps. You imagine the Neolithic and Bronze Age farmers living on the moor, their religious ceremonies shaped by light and stone and season. You read that their circle is named after the mythic giant Fingal, and that there is a stone with a hole in it, where Fingal is said to have tied his dog Bran while he ate inside the ring. You think about the voidlike traces of dogs—holes, voids, impressions—and their historical records. You think about the tall, red sandstone pillar, its oblique, silent address pebbled by a skin of green moss. The artist took her infant daughter to see this stone, then took this picture. Can we see this in the image she recorded? What is emotional literacy, aesthetic cogency? What is inheritance—esthetic, spiritual, geological, animal, mineral? How to frame the domestic, the physical, the material, the ritual, the present and the prehistoric? How to bring them onto the same surface? How to record an object; how to redouble it. You look at the image; you look at a series of the artist's images across different formats. At photographs of objects and at photographs as objects. Stone, hand, sculpture, paw, fragment, ritual, daughter. How does that work. The work itself—at once sober and spectral, strangely straightforward in the most elliptical

manner—insists on both a literary and a geological sensibility, a feeling for images and their negative capabilities, a lucid materialism, both wet and dry. Some *thing* ceremonial, gifted. Indeed, the artist has such sensibility in spades, one could say (you say it). If there is something organic and originating in her work—all geology, gestation, mineral, metal, chemical, trace and retrace—it is then framed, constellated, roused and reused and made into a refrain. Her images smell of wet and stone (that which has no smell, perhaps, though Woolf objects), of the temporal and the chemical (that which acts over time), of distance and soil (that). This writer is reaching—the reader feels her reaching—but so do the artist's images. They reach and push their spectator (close and away). Surfaced with desire, her images are resoundingly literate in their very quiet. Articulating both the social field (through the ages) and a kind of seismic privacy. "This was in the same film as 'Aileen'—there's a very faint light leak on this negative too," the artist writes, laconically. Her language another image that rises, repeats, ritualistically.

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## ENDNOTES

*...But of thee it shall be said,  
This dog watched beside a bed  
Day and night unweary, —  
Watched within a curtained room,  
Where no sunbeam brake the gloom  
Round the sick and dreary.*

*Roses, gathered for a vase,  
In that chamber died apace,  
Beam and breeze resigning —  
This dog only, waited on,  
Knowing that when light is gone,  
Love remains for shining...*

— Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “To Flush, My Dog”

All quotes by the artist, Lorna Macintyre, are from her email correspondence with the author, Quinn Latimer, during the spring and summer of 2018.

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