

The Visible World

Alyssa Pelish

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following pages were brought to us by the granddaughter of the woman who wrote them. The granddaughter found them among her own mother's belongings after her death, and soon came to comprehend their significance. She also understood that her grandmother, and her mother in turn, had ultimately chosen to keep the pages to themselves. For several years, she mulled over which course would in fact honor her grandmother's wishes: to reveal the pages or to keep their secret. At last, she decided she would simply let her grandmother speak. And so, as a matter of historical, and perhaps artistic, interest, we offer a transcription of the manuscript, as it was found.

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I REMEMBER, FROM CHILDHOOD, an illustrated book of ancient stories, rendered in verse, the pictures darkly engraved. It must have been there that I first came upon the feat of the artist Parrhasius. On the occasion of a contest between Parrhasius and the celebrated artist Zeuxis, the latter had been all but declared the winner, given that his painting of a bunch of grapes was so realistic that it brought the birds swooping down to peck at it. Merely as a formality, Zeuxis demanded that Parrhasius draw back the curtain behind which his own painting was concealed, so that it could be duly judged. But it soon became clear that Parrhasius could not: the curtain was the painting, the painting the curtain. So lifelike was the curtain that even his celebrated rival had mistaken it for the real thing. For this grand illusion, Parrhasius was declared the superior artist.

As a child, I think I sometimes wondered: what if no one had ever been able to discover that the curtain of Parrhasius was in fact an illusion? Wouldn't that have been a greater feat?

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FAIRIES PHOTOGRAPHED. In giant letters, across the very top of a magazine that everybody knew, the photos were announced. *An epoch-making event*. And, trumpeted in even bigger letters: *As described by SIR L. BARRETT CRAWFORD*—the celebrated author—which meant that everybody would pay attention. And there, when you opened the magazine, just past the advertisements for Bird's foods, when you turned the page, was the first photo. Constance, encircled by fairies. I really had gotten her to look just very gently entranced. Enchanted, you could say. She stares out, almost pensive, the mist from the beck like a halo of fairy dust above her sweet head, fairy dust from the delicate wings of the ethereal creatures that flutter about her. 'An epoch-making event', Sir Barrett Crawford wrote.

And he believed it.

'Sixty years on, the Thistleton fairies are still bringing a bit of magic into our lives', the woman from the BBC explains to me, over the phone. *Play of the Month*, she says, is airing a young writer's play inspired by the story of the 'Thistleton fairies'.

I think of how the Greco-Roman painters of illusion inspired the *di sotto in su* ceiling frescoes of the Italian Renaissance, how those feats of illusion in turn influenced the great trompe l'oeil painters of the Dutch Golden Age, how these gave rise to the enthralling mirages of Baroque stage scenery, so real in appearance the audience believed they might walk right into them.

On the occasion of this children's play, the woman says, one of their news programmes would like to do a little segment on the story behind it. Interviews with Constance and me. Excerpts from Sir Barrett Crawford's first article. Perhaps from his book. And the photos, of course. My photos.

'In this day and age, in the modern world of 1977, I suppose we all *want* to clap our hands for fairies, but *can* we truly believe?' The woman gives a jovial chuckle. 'When you were a girl, though, the story goes, your camera captured *photos* of fairies.'

Yes, I say.

'There are many who continue to wonder how you did it. Why, just this week, we received calls from a folklorist and an investigator of the paranormal who are locked in a heated dispute'. A wink in her voice. 'We here at *Nationwide* would like to hear *your* side of the story'.

Of course, of course, I say.
She says she will call again soon.

FAIRIES PHOTOGRAPHED emblazoned on the cover of the magazine. *As described by SIR L. BARRETT CRAWFORD.* That was how the story had to be told. I was a simple village girl who'd never held a camera in her life, who sometimes amused herself with little sketches and watercolours but certainly had no artistic aspirations. Flora (for Sir Barrett Crawford called me 'Flora' in his article) had 'taken a photograph'—as if I were an infant who had accidentally pressed the right lever on a camera that had somehow ended up in her hands at the right moment. My character, Sir Barrett Crawford assured his readers, was one of 'transparent honesty and simplicity'.

Flora and her little cousin Chloe, the story went, often played in the wood surrounding the falling water of the beck just beyond the family home, a place where they were wont to descry wee folk. One summer afternoon, after much pleading on Flora's part, her father indulged her with a single plate in his hobbyist's camera, taking care to show her which lever to press before the two girls scampered off. And then, oh! How Flora and Chloe danced about that afternoon as Flora's father developed the plate they returned to him! The older girl even wriggled her way into the makeshift darkroom and cried out as the tiny forms of the fairies, perfect negatives of what she'd spied at the beck, materialised in the development bath: 'Oh, Chloe, Chloe!' Flora exclaimed. 'The fairies are on the plate! The fairies are on the plate!'

The girls were ingenues, the camera a precise instrument of documentation.

This was how it had to be told.

Not long after the woman from the BBC rings off, Constance's voice is trembling over the phone line. 'It's all come back again'. I know the undertone of accusation.

Over the decades, my fairy photos have surfaced again and again. There was the very first, initial clamour, caused by the article in the big magazine. Even though Sir Barrett Crawford had disguised us with pseudonyms, there we were, of course, in the photos, and enterprising reporters soon found their way to us. Constance, I know, was tracked down at school, peppered with questions amidst her gawping

classmates. Her face appeared in newspapers as far away as South Africa. It rattled her. But I smiled, and even blushed a little (mostly from excitement), when two reporters up from London called out to me from the edge of our front garden. 'For how long have you seen fairies?' 'Can you tell us about the fairies?' Two years later, when Sir Barrett Crawford published his book, my first photo of Constance amidst fairies on the cover, our real names now revealed, currents of interest arose once more—chatter, more reporters, debate in the papers. Then there was the lecture tour undertaken by Sir Barrett Crawford on the heels of his book, his magic lantern show of my photographs drawing more attention to us and the beck. Some years afterward, there arose a debate between Sir Barrett Crawford and a university sceptic which appeared in *The Daily Mail*, to similar effect. Over two decades later, Constance was unexpectedly confronted with that old childhood likeness of herself, a fairy hovering near the tip of her nose, on display just inside her neighbourhood library: a spiritualist confrère of Sir Barrett Crawford's had published his own book on the subject. Constance told her husband they needed to move. So they did.

And now, sixty years on, this BBC retrospective.

Constance has always hated the attention. There is a sense, I think, in which she holds it against me. It was in fact a shame that, after Sir Barrett Crawford's article, her world at the beck was intruded upon—curious people came, with nets and detective cameras. But if something was lost to her, I believe that something was gained for the world: an enchantment which surpasses the everyday, which surpassed the grimness of the war. The play of light and shadow in my photos, of luminescent beings emerging from the darkness, silhouetted earthly shapes echoing but outshone by ethereal forms—this is an enchantment that endures. I don't think Constance has ever understood this. But then, I don't think she's ever understood much about art, how it works upon the beholder. I've always been struck by how people return to my photographs again and again, as if to the mystery of the *Mona Lisa*, lured by an image that withholds as much as it offers.

The difference, though, is that everyone recognizes the artistry of that famous work. Everyone recognizes the artist.

The story of the fairy photos, as it came to be told, as it had to be told, was that provincial Flora had never before held a camera in her life.

The camera was a simple recording device, picking up only what was true. But the truth was that I knew something about taking pictures.

During the first year of the war, my father had acquired a Midg quarter plate from a relative of ours. It was a means, I suppose, of documenting what was tangible in the flux of uncertainty. Men being pressed into khaki and crowded into train cars, a munitions factory being hammered together at Bradford, the queues at the shops growing longer all the time, the first wounded arriving in motor ambulances. I watched as he set up a makeshift darkroom in what had been a larder, blacking out the one window save for a small square of it, which he covered with red tissue paper. When the sun shone, it looked like a single pane of stained glass. He was always hesitant to let me handle anything, but if I pestered him, sometimes he allowed me to watch as he transformed what looked like a blank glass plate into a ghostly image.

Right before my eyes, as my father jostled the bath of development solution, a faintly familiar scene would surface on the glass, a picture of a world that was the tonal inverse of ours, where the sky was always mysteriously dark, the shadows light, the crowns of the trees radiating an unearthly glow. People appeared as phantoms, candescent in their suits and dresses but for their curiously darkened faces and hands. This strange twilight was a necessary passage between the pressing of a lever and the precipitate of a photograph, but I didn't yet know why.

And so, without his knowing it, I sat up reading my father's copy of the *Ilford Manual of Photography*, as avid as a child with a *Coloured Fairy* book on her lap. That was how I began to learn about the fantastical behaviour of light. White light, I knew, was somehow a confluence of all the colours in the spectrum, a fact that still seemed beyond my ken—like an old wives' tale. But I'd had no idea that those different colours vibrated at different wavelengths, each one an individual effervescence. Violet and blue, for instance, were much more quivery than red. There were diagrams in the book—arrows for rays and undulating lines for wavelengths—and the rays, even those beamed from as far away as the sun, bent by different degrees when they encountered matter, depending on the nature of that matter, whether it was rough or smooth, opaque or transparent. It was as if the light were a living being you could grasp if you had the right instruments. And that was what a camera was. It captured light in a chamber, on a plate of silver salts. This was hardly less magical than fairy stories.

And so it was at a photographer's studio that I looked for work the spring that I was fifteen and suddenly loosed for good from the nearby girls' high school. The Bradford city centre had faded as the war dragged on, empty now of what had once enlivened it. But the photo studios still brought people in for portraits—a handsome likeness of the conscripted man for the family or sweetheart he was leaving behind, perhaps a card-sized semblance of them that he could set before himself while far away. A classmate of mine and her mother had sat for one, their pale clothing and light hair making them almost spectral against the shadowy backdrop. A tiny print of it went off to her father in a city none of us had ever seen.

These portraits didn't call for much variation, but all I wanted at the time was to spend my days among lenses and shutters and glass plates that captured light, mixing the sharp-smelling potions that would summon the ghostly image of a negative, which might then surface as palest lavender, sulphurous yellow, neutral brown, or cyan, according to the slippery sheets of paper and the solutions they were bathed in. I wanted to try, on my own, all the variations described in the *Ilford Manual*.

What I could find, though, was a job doing what was called 'hand-work'. In a line of other girls in a back room, I sat all day in front of a small contraption, prodding at one negative after another to correct sections that had been over- or underexposed. At first, I liked this new power I'd been granted—manipulating the light that a camera had already captured. Scraping away at the emulsion on the glass plate with a special blade, rubbing at it with powdered chalk. It was repetitive work, but there was an artistic element to it, I thought—affecting light, affecting shadow.

And it was there that I came upon photos of a sort I hadn't seen before. One of the photographers kept catalogues from an annual exhibit called the Photographic Salon, and I paged through them when there was a break. These were unlike the studio portraits I knew or the snaps my father took. These photographs were like paintings, whole in their composition, moody and evocative. I loved the rich hazes and mists, which might have been painted in oils, conjuring the chiaroscuro and sfumato of an abandoned world or the landscape of a dream. I lingered over their details: the rain-wet sidewalk which, in its reflected light, lengthened the spindly trunks of the trees above as the silhouettes of their spidered branches spread like intricate

shadows upon the pallid sky, a pale shiver of a river set aglow by encroaching shadows, a full canopy of leaves rendered as dark and light blotches—as if the photographer himself had brought them into being.

What a dream, it seemed to me, to be able to capture tricks of the light, to capture them as they appeared to you, and to make those tricks your own.

Somewhere at the back of my mind, I suppose, hung the curtain that Parrhasius had painted, so real it had fooled even another artist. I understood that this feat, too, was a way of taking light and shadow into one's own hands so as to beguile the beholder. Just that year, I had come across the term *trompe l'oeil* in a book, and now I had a name for his feat.

It was a special genre of painting, that which tricked the eye.

I had found that I could sneak into the university library in Bradford just by following on the heels of a cluster of students who barely noticed me. At the time, the library had few books on photography but I took up a massive volume on the Dutch Golden Age of painting, assuming, or hoping, that *golden* referred to the light. And indeed, from what I could discern in the small reproductions on those pages, the shine on a copper candlestick, the penumbral glow of a flame, the small points of light reflected on each grape in a bunch were of the utmost importance. But I learned that one might also know this golden age by any number of paintings wherein hang a curtain half concealing the grapes or candlestick—so lifelike a curtain that it seems just a matter of flinging it back. Of course it can't be done. The curtain too has been painted. It appears to exist in this world, the world outside the painting, but this is a matter of art. It requires a mastery of light and shadow, of vanishing points and picture planes, and an uncommon understanding of how desire works. The curtain of Parrhasius, it came to be called.

So I read more about this golden age.

And in that book of light filtering through windowpanes and glowing round a flame, of light reflecting off the sheeny folds of a skirt and the roundness of a grape, of light casting shadows that gave form and fullness to each shape, there was a description of a work called *View of a Corridor*. It appeared to be an arching doorway that opened into a sun-shadowed room, though which ran a corridor leading through other doorways, each one leading to another room, and

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another, each of which it seemed possible to step through. A grand man had hung this work inside the closet of a grand house and would, to show it off to his visitors, throw open the closet door and allow them to peer inside. As I imagined it, the guests peering through the closet doorway were somehow prevented from stepping any further—much as they longed to—and therefore, as far as they could tell, the *View of a Corridor* continued to draw their gaze. Only the great man who owned the painting, and the artist himself, knew the secret: the corridor was in fact an oil painting on a wooden panel.

A little thrill ran through me as I imagined this feat.

Provincial Flora, the story goes, had never in her life held a camera before she saw the fairies. But it was at the photography studio that I took my first picture.

Only one plate, the photographer said. I had pestered him enough, but politely, that he finally gave way. I wasn't to stray from the front garden, though. It hardly mattered. As I wandered the perimeter, the black box of the camera in my hands, I felt the great miracle of what I was about to do: capture light on a glass plate. Light that had travelled all the way from the sun at a velocity all its own. I thought of the diagrams in the *Ilford Manual*, the arrowed lines and undulations. It seemed a surreal opportunity. And I had only one plate.

I considered the thin trees and mottled stone houses and few shops along the street, the schoolboys passing in their short pants and collars, the oozy tire tracks of a motorcar that had rattled its way through the town not long before. If I walked just a bit farther, I could capture the clock tower of the city hall, with its black face and gold hands, or the dark plume of smoke issuing from the nearest worsted mill, or the narrow tower of St . But none of these subjects seemed suited to the grandeur of what I was about to undertake. I thought I might pace back and forth forever, searching, until the photographer became cross with me and took the camera and its magical glass plate away.

Then I saw the puddle. It had rained that morning, and the untidy front garden was full of puddles. One of them, perfectly round and flat, rimmed with fallen leaves, lay on the matted grass like an incidental portal to another world, where one bathed in the clouds and the houses balanced on their rooftops.

For some time, I stared at the view of this strange world through the smooth surface of the puddle. Even the dark edges of the clouds

and the glint of small windowpanes were momentarily visible.

There were only two shutter speeds on the little camera, but 1/100th of a second seemed astonishingly fast. In the *Ilford Manual*, there was a diagram of rays of light bending as they encounter the curved surface of a lens, their course suddenly altered as they pass through, as if their free spirits had been waylaid by a force larger than theirs, commanded to travel in a slightly different direction. I hefted the miraculous device in my hands.

I knew that as soon as I pressed the lever, the shutter would open, and when it shut again, the perfect image on the ground would have flown onto the sensitive glass plate within, the light and shadow of this otherworldly scene fixed upon it by tiny grains of silver.

After I released the lever, I found that I had been holding my breath.

I turned sixteen the winter that my cousin Constance and aunt came to stay with us in Thistleton. I remember how her moony face was barely visible between the heavy brimmed hat and bulky blue overcoat her mother had swaddled her in. She was just seven. I felt tenderly toward her. We both had strange accents, hers from faraway Cape Town, where her dad had been stationed, and mine from faraway Toronto, where for several years my own father had taken work wiring a number of factories. Neither of us quite sounded like we were from Yorkshire anymore. And I recognized the dreaminess in her. It reminded me of the sort I slipped into easily enough, a way of making up the world that you needed.

Seeing my cousin's muted disappointment at her new surroundings, the West Riding of Yorkshire in late winter, I was suddenly aware of how dismal the grey stone buildings looked, darkened by soot and never illuminated by the glow of any street lamps or bright windows. I remember telling her about the coppery tunes the tall Bradford clock tower chimed out on the hour, how the sound would fill the air and linger, almost like a spirit—but I had to admit to her that she wouldn't be able to hear the tunes, that none of us had since the war began. Then it seemed, as I watched her moony face, that the clock tower's silence laid bare the bleak sky and the horrible smell of grease, always on the air, from the woollen mills. I saw, through her eyes, the bread on our table, always black and bitter, the thin scraping of margarine that scarcely eased the dryness. I saw the way we gathered round the "Wounded, Missing, and Dead" column in

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every evening's paper, staring at phrases such as *died of pneumonia, killed in action, trench hands and feet, died of wounds*. How the notices were as grey and regular as the weather.

Constance, though, had her fairy books. *The Blue Fairy Book, The Violet Fairy Book*. In fact, between the two of us, we had a prodigious collection. All twelve of Lang's *Coloured Fairy books*, and then some. The glittering pages of Dulac's fairy book. That wispily illustrated Peter Pan. A gigantic Grimms' and a silvered-over copy of *Stories from Hans Christian Andersen*. And a big blue book of fairy verse, which Constance came clutching. I can still picture how she hugged it to her chest. I knew the rhymes she knew, and the water-colour and fine pen-and-ink pictures they summoned, but Constance had quite possibly recited them more times. *Merrily, merrily, shall I live now*. (I would hear her singing under her breath.) *Under the blossom that hangs on the bough*.

But I certainly knew the illustrations. Sometimes I think my visual imagination must have been formed, at least in part, by those rich colour plates that were hidden in fairy books. It may have been from them, those diaphanous images of fairy rings and flight by moonlight, that I first learned to appreciate compositions of light and shadow. Even now I can see, as if on the back of my eyelids, Richard Doyle's *Dancing Fairies*, how the moonlight almost blanches the little fays of their colour, as if their image has been captured on an overexposed camera plate. In another of his watercolours of a fairy dance, my eye was drawn to the central, ethereal glow, edged as it was by a darker world, shadowy lily pads gone by, bowing blades of grass, receding into the night.

Sometimes, in the evening, I'd read to Constance from the book of fairy poems. She knew them all herself, but she liked being read to, and plenty of that poetry still charmed me. It did seem more alive when we said it aloud. She would recite with me, eyes intent, the refrain of 'The Stolen Child': *Come away, O human child! To the waters and the wild, With a faery, hand in hand, For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand*. I don't know that she did grasp the whole of the world's weeping at that time, the vast, ragged range of the war. But she knew her own world, in which her winsome papa had been sent to the front and her mum's hair was falling out—they said—from worry, and every day on her walk home from school she passed a front porch where a hollow-eyed man sent back from the front just sat and stared. I think we both secretly wished, sometimes, to be taken away by fairies.

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I first thought to take Constance up the beck of a Saturday afternoon in May or early June following that long winter. Only then were the banks dry enough. I showed her what I said was the secret way—down the cellar and out the back door, through the garden and beyond, following the sound of gurgling water until what was just a trickle widened, making two separate banks apparent, and we came upon the willow with a split trunk, one half growing upwards and the other stretching over the water like a ledge. We would perch on its rough bark, our feet dangling just above the water, and from there, we could look out upon our kingdom. Its halcyon shades of green were flecked with silverweed and stitchwort and bright berries and filled with the rushing of the little waterfall. The farther bank caught the afternoon sun, which the leaves of silverweed seemed to reflect back toward us and was in turn reflected by the rippling water, become all light and shadow, edged by slippery, mossy rocks.

And so it was a bit of a respite for me too. The job I worked had become tedious. There was little variation. Every day, from morning till evening, I scraped and I rubbed, scraped and rubbed. But at the weekend, there was the beck. After a while, it was Constance who would lead the way, slipslopping over the mossy bank. *Down along the rocky shore, Some make their home.* She liked to chant as we tramped along on those warm afternoons. *They live on crispy pancakes, of yellow tide-foam.* Rhymes and images from the big book of fairy poems populated her imagination, and she often talked about these ethereal beings as if it were just a matter of catching sight of them. A pale violet water nymph transpiring in the spray of the falls. Translucent fairies shimmering through a game of oranges and lemons. *Out the little fairies fly upon their scented wings, Float about and shake themselves . . . delicious little things.* She mentioned hearing a very faint tinkling of bells, which was of course a fairy language. Sometimes she would dart about, as if chasing beings too ephemeral to catch. *Lightly as the little bee, Two by two, and three by three, And about go we, and about go we!* Other times, she'd sit very still, very alert, as if she'd been enchanted.

She was only a little girl, and I was happy to indulge her. I would sit with her, the two of us on our willow ledge, and we'd point out to each other sudden shivers and shadows in the tall grasses, the dark shapes of birds whisking by, a shimmer upon the surface of the water, and describe them as different sorts of fairies. A blue fairy

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with wings like a dragonfly's, a circle of fairies tripping round in a ring as she'd once done with the friends she'd had in Cape Town. The commonplace boundaries of the grown-up world were for her still quite soft and porous. Little was fixed, just about anything might be transfigured. Or at least, if she whiled away whole afternoons at the beck, it was because the grim grey buildings of the town didn't allow for the same sense of possibility.

That Constance saw fairies became a subject of mirth for the adults in the household. She passed more of her days at the beck than I did, and I remember an evening when her mother, who was always vexed with Constance for coming home with her shoes and stockings sopping, lost her temper. Constance was liable to catch her death from pneumonia. Did she want to catch her death? Mucking around up there. And for what? She'd been up the beck, she said, to see what was there, and there was nothing at all to see—*nothing*. Only damp.

And Constance, usually so soft and shrinking, burst out that there *was*, there *was something*. 'I go up to see the fairies', she suddenly said.

Now she was just telling stories, her mother said. Then she fastened on me, the responsible older cousin. Had I ever seen any fairies up there? She looked from me to Constance, and back at me again.

I said nothing at first. I remember staring at the rug in the entryway, so greyed that its pattern was barely discernible. It seemed cruel to me, to deny the shadows and shimmerings that were, for Constance, fairies. It would be like pulling the stuffing out of a child's favourite doll. And in the silence that had yet to be filled, I said yes—I had seen fairies at the beck.

How curiously they looked at me. My aunt, momentarily muted. My mother and father, their faces softened, almost rounded.

But soon enough it faded. There was the tea to get and the smudgy fire to start, and had anyone collected the evening's paper?

Then it became a joke. If either Constance or I was caught with her head momentarily in the clouds, if one of us was ever late, ever forgetful, there were remarks about seeing fairies. We must have been off in *fairyland*, they took to saying, not a little knowingly. But that, in a way, was how I found my subject matter.

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I sometimes think about how other artists found their great subject matter. The curtain of Parrhasius. The quadratura domes of Andrea Pozzo. The trompe l'oeil corridors of Samuel van Hoogstraten. They started with what they saw around them.

That summer, the summer Constance and I were all the time being chaffed for 'seeing fairies', I waited for an evening when everyone else was out of the house. Then I got my pencils and watercolours. Beneath the lamp light atop the bureau I shared with Constance, I tried to picture the tricks played on us by the light and wind at the beck—tricks we invited them to play—the flutter and forms they suggested. What emerged from my imagination was something dragonfly winged and silverwort fringed. Familiar enough to be recognizable but strange enough to seem real. Capable of being captured from about four feet away, in sunlight, with a shutter speed of 1/50th of a second. When I'd sketched and painted a veritable troop of fairies, I cut them out and cemented them on Bristol board and, then, very, very carefully, did I cut them out again, until each figure existed on its own.

Then I waited until the next time we were chaffed about *fairyland*.

We have taken the precaution, Sir Barrett Crawford assured his many readers, *of having the photographic negatives inspected three times over by experts in the field*. Technicians at Kodak, Ltd were unable to find any sign of tampering. No double exposure, no retouching. Another company reached the same conclusion although they stated that, because they were not experts on the theme of the supernatural, they could neither confirm nor deny any claims made about the photographic subjects. And an 'expert photographer of thirty years' practical experience' not only found the negatives pristine but exclaimed over the extraordinary sight captured on the glass plates. He even attested that the tiny figures moved, ever so slightly, when he examined them. Enlarged prints were made and subjected to the same searching examination. The results, Sir Barrett Crawford reported, remained extraordinary.

And indeed, what I'd captured on the glass plate, what appeared in the prints, was just what I'd seen, just what I'd envisioned.

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That first time, for the first photo, I arranged the cutouts on a leafy, mossy spot just in front of the little waterfall rushing into the beck. The long hatpins worked as I'd hoped, propping the Bristol board against thick leaves and bark. Since I'd painted the figures as if they were gambolling, their tiny arms and legs aloft, it was easy enough to pose them such that they appeared to be hovering on the air. And the wings, when I took a step back, worked especially well. I'd gotten the coloured shadows right, so that they looked as if they were aflutter, dappled by faint sun through the trees. The eye was drawn to them as if to an efflorescence of flowers, which then became something more.

Constance's eyes grew wide when she saw. After I'd called her over, she stood still for a moment, perhaps trying to decide how to approach these figures that had suddenly materialised before her, in a display so much more elaborate than the leaf figures we sometimes sent floating in tiny bark boats on the water. But soon, as if working out the rules of a new game she'd found herself invited to play, Constance crouched down. She looked up at me. I crouched down beside her, ignoring for a while the camera in my hands, and tried to chat with her as when we would sit side by side on the bank and point out to each other sudden shivers and shadows and describe them as different sorts of fairies. Now I asked her which sort she thought these fairies were. She frowned, as if she were still trying to work something out. But then she said that she supposed they were dancing white fairies, dancing being one way they communicated—because fairies had ways that we hadn't. *What I am, I must not show*, sing the dancing fairies in one of those verses Constance had by heart. *What I am thou couldst not know*.

'Can you hear them?' I asked her, and she said nothing for a moment. Then, glancing at me, she nodded. 'Can't you?' I told her that I could, but only very faintly, and I thought she must be better able to hear them than I. 'Yes', she said, and gave me a funny look. She could hear the fairy pipes that one of them was playing—it sounded like a fine, high-pitched flute. And she could hear their voices. 'Like chimes', she said, and I thought of the clock tower that no longer sounded.

When I backed away with the camera, only a few feet away, I kept up the chatter. What were the fairies saying to each other now? Were they chanting? By now, Constance's attention was on the camera, and I felt a bit like Peter Pan, who would go on playing make-believe even when the other boys on the island had grown tired of it. I had

to tell her not to look at the camera. 'Look at the fairies round you'. Perhaps my tone became conspiratorial. 'We're going to show your mum that there *are* fairies here. She'll *see* them'.

It was sometime afterward, poking about in the university library, that I noticed a name I recognised on the spine of a heavy book: Samuel van Hoogstraten. The artist behind the trompe l'oeil corridor.

I remember there was a librarian moving slowly down that aisle, almost hovering, as if surveying the order of the books on each long shelf. I waited until he passed.

The book I hefted from the shelf was the great trompe l'oeil artist's treatise. I turned the pages. Engravings and poetry, chapters accorded a tutelary muse. He described his art as a science, *which is perfect when it reaches the end stated by the praiseworthy Parrhasius*.

I read with more and more interest.

It is a science for depicting all ideas, or mental images, which the entire visible world can provide—and for deceiving the eye.

I remember cradling the book in my arms so I could keep reading right where I stood.

It happens, sometimes, that you come upon an articulation of something you recognize—a feeling, an idea, a belief. And you realise that this is something you have always known but never put into words.

The Visible World, the book was called.

It was exhilarating, that very first time, to watch as the forms I'd created, the small world I'd summoned into being, swam into view beneath the developing bath. And to watch my father's face, bathed in the stained-glass red of the darkroom, shift from mild interest to perplexity. I remember how, for a moment, he looked at me. Had I been up to something? But all I'd done, I said, was press the lever the way he'd shown me.

I stayed with him as he held the bromide paper to the glass plate, as if light were being transmitted by touch, and as he submerged the sheet of paper in the sharp-smelling bath, jostling the pan as we waited.

Then, at last, there it was, the image I'd created. The light wings, slightly blurred, seemed caught in midflutter. The darkened blades of wild grass bending in the foreground echoed the pale limbs. And

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the luminescence of these pale tones drew the eye from the dark that surrounded them. It was better, I thought, than Doyle's *Fairy Dance in a Clearing*.

Constance was quiet at the sight of the photo. There she was—her moony face, her everyday shirtsleeves. And surrounding her were the figures I had declared were fairies. She looked at the photo, then at me again, and I saw the same uncertainty pass over her as when I'd first shown her the cutouts I'd arranged. But then, perhaps catching my excitement, she gave a little cry, a little *Oh!* When her mother, peering over her shoulder, asked her, now intrigued, if those were the fairies she saw up the beck, Constance seemed to realise something and, after a second's pause, said, Yes, yes they were, plain as day!

In his treatise, the great trompe l'oeil artist advises his fellow artists to take advantage of the camera obscura—that precursor of the modern camera. But this was not because he believed the image it created was a perfect copy of nature. Rather, he saw it as an opportunity to study perfect artifice—to examine how its composition of shades and shadows created the illusion of projection and recession, and thus the illusion of the real thing. The convolutions of a corridor. Clouds massing behind a clock tower.

What is real is light and shadow. But these are slippery. What our eyes make of them, as van Hoogstraten understood so well, is always an illusion. There is no more a flat disc in the sky than there is a man in the moon, and yet we have seen them both. To depict the real thing, the thing that is real to us, van Hoogstraten understood, is to depict the illusion.

When he received a letter from Sir Lionel Barrett Crawford, in the spring of 1917, my father was of course surprised. At the time, we knew Sir L. Barrett Crawford only as the author of a series of popular detective stories, tales of a physician turned detective who solved mysteries through his powers of reason. *Ratiocination* was the property we associated with Sir Barrett Crawford. His detective stories were often in the big magazine, one of a few which my father occasionally brought home, and I remember how, while reading them, he would sometimes bring his hand down on the armchair with a guffaw, so impressive were the detective's powers of ratiocination.

My father was honoured to receive the letter. Here was a man who

operated according to the principles of reason, a man who had been knighted for outstanding service as a medical officer in the Boer War. But why should this great man be writing to him?

Sir Barrett Crawford explained to my father that he had seen the very interesting photos his little daughter had taken. (I had, by then, eked another glass plate out of my father, at which point I took the second famous photo.) They were, he said, certainly amazing. As it happened, he was writing an article for a notable magazine upon the evidence for the existence of fairies, and so the photos naturally were of great interest to him. He would, in fact, like to use them in his article. He was writing to ask my father's permission.

When I phone Constance, she isn't in. Her husband isn't certain when she'll be back. After a moment, he says he'll tell her I called. That will be fine, I tell him, and lay the receiver back in its cradle.

I suppose I had collapsed Sir Barrett Crawford into the figure of his detective, so that it was a surprise to see he was not in fact a tall, spare figure marked by an intensity of mental concentration. The man who stepped out of a high black motorcar in a double-breasted suit was instead rather portly, with grey moustaches that granted him the appearance of a walrus, and such a squint that he appeared to be continually looking into the sun. He gave a slight bow to us, then shook my father's hand.

The honour of receiving this distinguished figure was not lost on my father, and my mother and aunt had gone out of their way to show him their respect, replacing the usual oilcloth with a white tablecloth I'd never seen before, arranging tall daisies in a seldom-used vase, and generously offering what little tea and sugar we had in a china set they'd borrowed from their sister over in Bradford who had married well.

Sir Crawford squinted at it all and praised my mother for having brought the photos to the expert from the Spiritualist Association, who, during a lecture she had attended, mentioned fairies as possible emanations of the spirit realm. Contact with this realm, perhaps we knew, had been established through specially attuned individuals, as at séances. Through such channels, the spirits of those we'd known in the mundane world could be sensed. No one, it seemed, was lost after death on earth. Sir Barrett Crawford's voice rose, perhaps an

octave. Wonderfully, these spirits we had known incarnate existed now at a different frequency of vibration, and we could still be in communication with them.

I thought then of how one of the girls at work had passed around a photo of herself that had been taken at a séance, held at the home of a spiritualist. In the photograph, a cheap gaslight print that had run yellowish, she sat with her eyes cast downward while a vaporous figure, an inverse silhouette, enveloped her, but gently, as when a husband embraces his wife. We all pressed in to see it better. We were wiser than most to the tricks that could be worked on a photographic plate—the effects of a double exposure, the various techniques of retouching. But the girl's sweetheart had died of pneumonia while at the front. And he had returned to her, she told us. She had no doubt. At the séance, they had drawn him out, drawn out his spirit. She had felt it, like a warm breath against the nape of her neck, a reassuring presence. And here was this photograph to prove it.

At our table, Sir Barrett Crawford spoke quietly, as if he had no doubt that he would be heard, and in fact my father, at the far end of the table, leaned forward to catch all that he said. The celebrated author and man of reason would, from time to time, as he spoke, look meaningfully at Constance and me, as if he knew that we could better understand what he was describing. The fairies' vibrations, he told us, must be near enough to those spirits of our lost beloveds that, here too, psychic power was required to render them visible, and the sensitive plate of a camera to record them. It was rare to be attuned to vibrations far outside the normal spectrum, and so it was that he believed that our auras, as young as we were, must be almost unspoiled, and that it was the joining of them that produced such a remarkable effect.

He turned, with gravity, to our parents. These photographs we had taken were promising evidence of an aspect of the spirit realm that had been heretofore very little explored, he explained. It was this effect, so remarkably recorded, that meant the human race might be on the edge of a new continent, separated not by oceans but by subtle and surmountable psychic conditions.

It was impossible for me to tell what either of my parents, or my aunt, were thinking, so concerned were they to demonstrate their utmost respect for our visitor. My mother and aunt nodded as he spoke, often wide-eyed, apparently intrigued. They had, themselves, lately developed some interest in spiritualism. As the war dragged on, they'd begun to attend some lectures of the Spiritualist Association

in Bradford. My father sat with his hands folded on the table, listening intently, and occasionally glancing at Constance and me, as if he were trying to square the both of us with Sir Barrett Crawford's discussion of vibrations and auras. Constance, I could tell, was trying not to fidget. Perhaps she too was trying to square this serious talk with her own water nymphs and wood elves.

For a while, as I sat there, I was stumped. Of course I knew that the photographs I'd created had to do with the vibrations of light waves, not of the spirit world. I had stuck the hatpins in the cutout figures myself. But Sir Barrett Crawford spoke with such authority that I did half wonder, as I listened to his accounts of various researches and observations, whether it wasn't possible that he did in fact know something, so that the correspondence between what he had witnessed and what I'd depicted was something like that between an astronomer's observations of Saturn's rings and an artist's imagining of the same.

We sat round the table, listening to Sir Barrett Crawford, until our shadows against the wall began to lengthen and the clink of our teaspoons against the china stilled.

Our guest told us he was eager to see the sites where the fairies had come to us, and so, with my father's permission, and my mother and aunt walking just a little behind, he accompanied Constance and me to the beck. I remember how odd it felt to lead a small caravan of people down to the cellar and out the back door, where I had to warn Sir Barrett Crawford of the step down, then through the garden and toward the first glinting runnel of water—a route that it seemed only Constance and I had ever taken. Every movement I made seemed significant. Every sight, every sound took on weight. The squelch of the mud, the shiver of tall grasses against my skirt, the dark shapes of birds whisking by. Here was Sir L. Barrett Crawford, celebrated author and man of reason, so affected by my photos that he was compelled to visit us here, as if it were one of the distant hills or islands that Arthurian legend draws people to. When I glanced back at him, his eyes were squinted into crescents as he took in the surroundings. The glinting water, the shivers and shadows in the grasses, the dark shapes of birds. It seemed, for a moment, that I had created the beck itself.

As we walked, he was keen to hear more about how it was that Constance and I drew the fairies to our side. And, just as when the forms of the fairies had come to me and I knew how to arrange them in the afternoon light, the story I would tell Sir Barrett Crawford

surfaced in my mind. It was never something we'd set out to do, I said. But we did often sit quietly and think of fairies, as was just our way, so that it hardly seemed surprising when the faint stirrings we'd notice, in the grasses, on the water, took on the forms of fairies. Sir Crawford thought this intriguing. How was it that we knew these forms were fairies? At first, it struck me as a trick question. Did they not, after all, look like fairies? But that, Sir Barrett Crawford said, with a rap of his walking stick, was where the sceptics might challenge us: might these fairies not be thought-forms conjured by the expectation of the seers? Might we not simply be seeing what, by way of stories and paintings, we imagined fairies looked like? For a moment, I was shaken. I thought he might be on to me after all, that he'd gotten too close. But his speculations took a different turn. 'That', he said, 'is what the sceptics will say'. He chuckled, as if pleased to have headed off the sceptics at the pass. 'But in a sense we are all thought-forms, since we can only be perceived through the senses'. I waited, not knowing precisely what he was talking about. He continued. 'It is our ability to record the fairies on a photographic plate that proves they have an objective reality'. He looked at me meaningfully, and I reflected back to him the same sort of expression.

When we came to the site of the first photo, the mossy rocks just below the spray of the little waterfall, I told him where we were and he suddenly stood very still. The fresh colours of the willow were reflected in the flowing water. The tall grasses moved to and fro in the wind.

'Ah. Ahh'. Sir Barrett Crawford had closed his eyes. He seemed to be receiving something. Constance looked up at him with curiosity. I waited patiently, wondering what he would come out with. The tall grasses continued to sway, to and fro.

He himself wasn't a sensitive, Sir Barrett Crawford said, when he'd opened his eyes. But he could almost feel something here, perhaps vibrations in the ether which he normally wouldn't have taken care to notice. 'We have had continued messages at séances for some time', he told us gravely, 'messages that a visible sign was coming through'. He looked around himself. 'And perhaps this was what is meant'.

I thought of the day that I'd arranged the cutouts along the mossy rocks, the care I'd taken to suggest shadows on their wings, to make those wings at first suggest a pale efflorescence in their dark surroundings, to capture the spray of the waterfall just beyond, at that shutter speed, so that it appeared as a fine mist of fairy dust.

I thought of how Parrhasius must have felt when Zeuxis demanded that the curtain he'd painted be drawn aside.

But I wasn't awarded any prize just then.

What I'd created wasn't an illusion that faded when someone reached out their hand to touch it. Instead, it seemed to deepen.

FAIRIES PHOTOGRAPHED blazed into the world that November. My photos appeared in faraway newspapers. Other people came forward to tell of their own sightings of fairy folk, in quiet glens, along out-of-the-way beckes. My photos lent credence to their tales. *If there is anything conventional about these figures*, Sir Barrett Crawford wrote, *it may be that fairies have really been seen in every generation, and so some correct description of them has been retained*. Theories of fairy anatomy and culture were propounded based on scrutiny of the figures in my photographs: their mothlike underwings, their furred hands, the appearance of a navel, suggesting humanlike reproduction. The effect of faintly luminous etheric protoplasm on their shadows was discussed.

People wanted to believe. Fairies were something beyond the grimness of those years. Fairies were proof there was a spirit realm, where those lost to the war were not really lost.

There were always disbelievers, sceptics who tried to explain just how a young girl had faked the appearance of fairies on a photographic plate. But their ideas were outlandish and generally deemed too complicated for a naive girl to carry out.

No one ever guessed precisely how I did it.

During those first years, I glowed with what I had created. I watched the effects of my photos unfurl. No matter that no one else knew of my feat. I had bested Parrhasius. That no one knew was part of my greatness, my artistry.

In preparation for the book he would write, Sir Barrett Crawford presented Constance and me with a Cameo quarter plate. It was a folding camera that he brought out, its leather bellows like an accordion just waiting to be played. Its lens gleamed in the light. We were to keep the camera with us, he said. When the fairies came to us, we would have a way of further documenting their ways. The camera was filled with six new plates.

For a moment, it seemed I *had* won a prize.

I had established a genre, the fairy photo. The first two of its kind had been deemed, according to the most ancient of standards, a great

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success: they were believed to be real. A truly great work of art, van Hoogstraten knew, can't be described solely in terms of its composition; the viewer's astonishment is the real mark of its greatness.

My photographs, a great man had declared, were an epoch-making event.

Of course Constance has never told anyone. What she saw at the beck, she says to me now, across the phone line between us, is no business of the BBC's or anyone else's.

She doesn't understand, not about art, not about *my* art. She is part of it, though. Where the shadows of the beck and the light of her face converge above the pale fairy wings in my photos, she's no longer just a girl—she's become an enchantment. But she doesn't see this. 'The beck was the enchanting thing', she once said to me. 'And the ledge where we would sit and watch the shapes that shifted through the grass and water'. What we saw then, she said, doesn't exist in the photos.

And so we don't talk about it.

Nor will she ever breathe a word to anyone else. She doesn't want to.

She and her husband have retired to a middling town in the south. She keeps a tidy back garden with hedges and has planted daylilies and peonies. She does not want her world intruded upon yet another time, she says.

What I will say to the BBC is not something we say anything about, not directly.

That I was the girl who took the famous fairy photos was not the great boon I imagined it would be. Four more of my fairy photos appeared, these in Sir Barrett Crawford's book. But I was famous for taking the photos—not for being a serious photographer.

What I wanted was to capture the play of light and shadow, to compass every real illusion I came upon. And, after I had finished creating fairy photos, I began to experiment. When I had the money for plates and chemicals, I would try this shutter speed or that angle or a different hour of the day. I would vary the combination of powders in the developer solution. I touched paints and pencils to the negatives to brighten or deepen or blur the highlights and shadows. From the developer bath arose eerie silhouettes against cloud-marbled

skies, rippled reflections on water, and long shadows thrown into a separate existence.

But they were dismissed out of hand. To try to submit these photos to the few exhibitions in Bradford was a fool's errand. I was a simple village girl who knew little about photography, who had happened to press the right lever at the right moment. The prints I made—the long fingers of the oaks rippling on the water in sulphurous tones, the silhouette of the split-trunked willow in rich brown, the dark shiver of shapes over the tall grasses in palest lavender, the fragile shadow of someone's butterfly net in cyan—collected in a little box. I remained at my job in the back room of the portrait studio, scraping and rubbing.

I knew, though, that I had already created a work of art greater than any of the photographs shown at those exhibitions. Sometimes I thought about the moment I would reveal the whole of my artistry—where I would announce it, what I would say, how spectators' mouths would drop open. But, I told myself, the longer people believed the fairies were real, the greater the work became, the greater my feat. And so I kept it to myself.

At the age of twenty, I married. (My mother's gown, a borrowed silver bracelet, a blue daisy.) The wedding, I suppose, was like other weddings of the time. But the honeymoon was in Rome, and this I remember distinctly. There was the excitement of it, of course. I had never before been out of England. The convolute of trains and the steamer alone were an occasion. But the promise of Rome, for me, lay not in the directory-like pages of our heavy Baedeker, in which the city seemed reduced to columns of names, numbers, and directions. What thrilled me was the prospect of chiaroscuro, the mastery of light and shadow that had begun with the Italian painters. I had seen only a page-sized reproduction of a Caravaggio, but even in that small square of paper I could see how the unearthly shaft of light gave form to the darkness, shaping its shadows. I imagined Rome as a city full of such effects, and that was what I wanted to see. I remembered, too, that the great trompe l'oeil artist had passed a year there, observing and studying, before his most astonishing works appeared.

And so I too passed through Rome, its summer heat and blinding sun and shadows, the still strange fact of my marriage gathering like a veil around me. Day by day, I found my way to works of chiaroscuro.

I would stare up at the otherworldly illumination of figures in darkness, thinking, at times, of luminescent fairy wings emerging from the shadows. Sometimes, as my husband and I walked near the end of the day, I would catch sight of stark shadows on a flat white facade and wish I hadn't been dissuaded from bringing my camera.

On a walk down the Via del Corso, which cuts straight through nests of meandering lanes and narrow alleys, a course outlined by the Baedeker, whose instructions my husband liked to follow to the letter, we stepped into the Church of Sant'Ignazio. The handbook advised something about paintings done by an able master of perspective, but in the heat of the day we were most immediately drawn by the coolness of its interior. It is impossible, though, to enter a baroque church without looking upward, and soon we were drifting through the nave with our faces turned toward a whirl of activity on the vaulted ceilings. The shadowy mass of figures seemed to be ascending to the heavens as we watched, their heads and gesturing arms already smaller than the lower halves of their swirling robes, the ceiling receding far higher than I might have guessed from the facade we'd just passed through. These whirling heights pulled us forward, inevitably, toward a great hollow of a dome at the far end of the church. I stood below it for a moment, taking in the ornate hemisphere centred on a glowing oculus.

And then I became aware of a sort of gleeful movement among the sightseers surrounding me. They kept stepping away from the spot where I had come to rest, only to return with delighted exclamation. 'Step away!' my husband now urged me, as if he had uncovered a great secret. So I did, mimicking the movement of the others. When I looked up again, what had been a dome was now a flat circle. Richly painted but flat. The ornate arch that had preceded it was now a painted band. I stepped back to the spot I had been standing on, and I was looking at a dome, aglow with the afternoon light. I withdrew again, and the dome was gone. It was a painting.

So this was *trompe l'oeil*! It was a vertiginous thrill. I stepped back and forth between reality and illusion. At one point, I hurried back through the nave and outside to stand in front of the facade. How short it was, how simple. There was no dome. And yet, when I returned to the spot inside the church, there was the hollowed-out space of the dome. A rich haze of light cast shadows in the round. That it wasn't real made the dome astounding.

It was late that night that I thought of van Hoogstraten's *View of a Corridor*. The great man in the great house throwing open the

closet door and inviting his guests to peer inside. Now I understood how it worked. Of course he hadn't kept the fact of the painting a secret—he told them it was a painting soon after they were fooled by the illusion. That was what made the sight astounding. You, the beholder, saw it as real even as you knew it was an illusion.

I lay with my head on a pillow, staring up at the ceiling of our hotel room crisscrossed with shadows from the street outside. Would the fairies still be real to the beholder once they knew I had created them?

'The play brings the magic of the Thistleton fairies to a new generation of children', the woman from the BBC explains to me. They'd like Constance and me to come in for a special viewing before it airs on television. She hasn't been able to reach Constance, so if I'd please pass on the message. Of course, I say.

We stepped inside many more baroque churches in Rome, and each of them had a dome. Ornate, centred on an oculus, aglow with daylight that streamed through small apertures ringing the hemisphere. And seemingly real. But after the dome at Sant'Ignazio, there was always a moment of uncertainty. What if what we saw was in fact an illusion? I would step back for a moment, with a spark of pleasure. That was the beauty of the trompe l'oeil dome—everything else became enchanted by the possibility of illusion. Was the world real, or was it all a grand mirage?

Confronted at last with the massive dome of Saint Peter's, seemingly incontrovertible against the painfully blue sky, I thought again of all the sightseers at Sant'Ignazio stepping back and forth beneath Pozzo's dome, switching between illusion and reality, illusion and reality.

No one, I knew, would ever do the same with my photos. The belief that the fairies were real, that a simple girl had captured them with a camera, was what enchanted the world. Revealing the illusion would break the spell. The photos would lose their hold on the beholder.

I remember reading of the lecture tour undertaken by Sir Barrett Crawford not long after I was married, his magic lantern casting the light and dark of my photographs against auditorium walls, drawing crowds who wanted just a glimpse.

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There was the lively debate between Sir Barrett Crawford and a university sceptic in *The Daily Mail*, just after the birth of my first child.

There was the book by a spiritualist confrère of Sir Barrett Crawford's, my second fairy photo on its cover. Both of my children were nearly grown by then.

There have been, since the beginning, letters—which seem to find their way to one or the other of us. People who have seen my photos, who say that they too have seen fairies. Fairies, spirits, signs of life from the other side. Constance throws hers out but I still read mine.

And now, sixty years after the first photos were printed, there is this BBC interview.

I was a simple village girl who had never held a camera in her life, who sometimes amused herself with little sketches and watercolours but certainly had no artistic aspirations.

That was how the story had to be told.