

PART I · CHAPTER THREE

Constraint as Generosity

The Dried-Flower Kitchen Curtains

or: how the flowers I almost composted made the prettiest curtains I've ever owned

What stopped me — *a houseful of flowers that were dying, and the small, stubborn refusal to throw them away just yet.*

There is a way a dried hydrangea head feels when you lift it down from a cabinet knob in February — papery, almost weightless, the color drained to a quiet bronze. A little dust falls. You'd forgotten you'd hung it there in January, after the guests left and the holiday arrangements began to give up.

I almost threw them away. I had a houseful of dying flowers in early January — bedrooms, baths, the dining sideboard, the kitchen island. They still had what I think of as the charm of flawed beauty, but they were on their way out. I wasn't quite ready to toss them, but, honestly, I had no idea what to do with them. I think one of the biggest mistakes one makes when doing a project is to stop too soon. I almost stopped too soon. I almost stopped before I started.



Odd bits and pieces — eucalyptus, statice, evergreen.

SEE

A few years before this, I'd taken the curtains down from my kitchen windows because my orchids and houseplants needed more light. The plants flourished. I, however, missed the softness — the way curtains soften the corners of a room, the way they give the kitchen a hush even when no one is in it.

So my kitchen had two needs that were in tension with each other: my plants wanted everything stripped away. I wanted something put back. For a few years I lived with the bare windows and the unspoken half-resentment that comes with any compromise.

GENERATE

When I sat down with my January box of dying flowers, I could see three things I could do.

One. Throw them out. (The truthful first option in any creative project — always: do nothing, lose nothing, change nothing. Always available, almost never the answer.)

Two. Dry them and put them back in vases. Decorative, but ephemeral — the dried arrangements would themselves give out in a few months, and I'd be in the same place again.

Three. Dry them and use the dried structure as material for something new — turn the bouquets into a built thing that lived in the kitchen for years, not weeks.

I sat with three for a while before I knew what the thing would be. Then I looked up at my bare windows and the plants in front of them, and the thing arrived: curtains. Curtains that didn't block the light. Curtains made out of the flowers themselves.



A view through the houseplants.

CHOOSE

I chose three because three made the two needs collapse into one solution. The plants kept all the light they had. The kitchen got its softness back. And the flowers I'd thought were spent became the most permanent thing in the room.

This is the move I want you to notice, because it shows up everywhere.

A constraint isn't a problem to be solved — it is the shape of the answer, waiting.

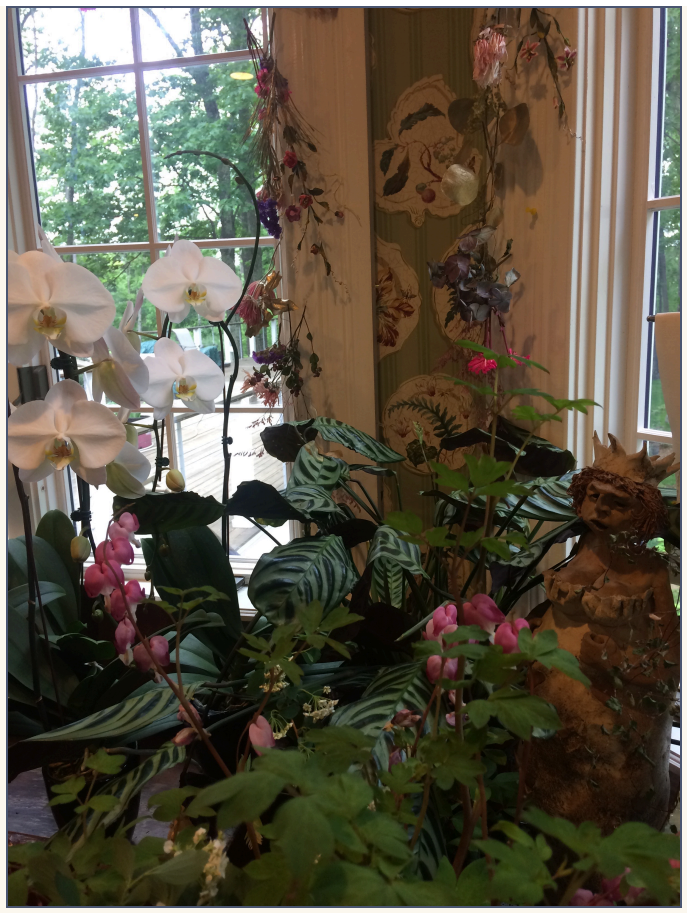
The flowers were dying. The plants needed light. I needed softness. The constraints did almost all of the design work for me. I just had to let them.



Poppy pods painted with pink and gold luster.

> **A LITTLE SPELL**
>
> **Hang one bundle from a cabinet knob today.**
>
> Don't plan to do anything with it. Just hang it where you'll walk past it three times before dinner.
>
> By the third pass, you'll have stopped seeing it as dying. You'll have started seeing it as material.

How I actually built them. Using a heavy-duty needle, I poked a hole in each dried flower stem. (The stems are tiny and split easily. Make the hole just after the flower is dried, while the stem is still a little bit soft.) I strung each flower on 26-gauge floral wire, giving a little crimp after each to hold it in place. The strung flowers are very fragile, so as I made each new tier for the valance and side panels I hung them in doorways all over the house. Yes, I have grandchildren, if you're wondering why there are unicorn reindeer hanging from the chandelier in the photograph.



Hung in a doorway during construction.

When I ran out of Christmas leftovers, I scrounged: eucalyptus leaves and berries sprayed gold, seed pods painted with pink and gold luster, evergreen needles, statice. They all went into the work. What fun I had.



Detail of the finished valance.

My dried-flower curtains are now seven months old and still look wonderful.

The most generous flowers in my kitchen this winter are the ones that almost ended up in the compost.



A summer view: the kitchen window onto the deck.