

Excerpt from *When this you See, Remember Me*

Below is the concluding section of a 2024 essay I wrote about the Rinhart collection. You can read the entire essay here: [When this You See, Remember Me](#)

One day, I find what is labeled as a post-mortem daguerreotype of a girl. Upon opening the case, I discover the image dim and faded, with hardly anything left but specs mirrored behind the glass. The spine of the case is broken. Tucked away behind the image is a handwritten note: “Mary Ann Powers, age 3 years 2 months. Died Oct 5th, 1847. Daughter of Darwin and Mary H. Powers. This picture was taken after she was dead.”

I photograph the daguerreotype with my phone for a closer look, using my fingers to zoom into the screen. This is where I find her faint outline. I use Photoshop to manipulate the pixels and further clarify the image. And I consider asking Artificial Intelligence to help me digitally resurrect her.

Instead, in the darkness of the early morning, with my phone rising and falling on the back of my own three-year-old girl sleeping on my chest, I search online for Mary Ann Powers. I learn that her parents had four other children and lived in Gardner, Massachusetts, where she died of dysentery. I find a photograph of a gravestone she shares with her parents in Evergreen Cemetery, its metadata detailing that it was captured on September 27, 2020, with a Samsung phone. The gravestone rests on patchy grass, with the sun shining behind a green maple tree, its leaves frozen in time, entering the top of the photographic frame. The 10 million pixels that make up the image were uploaded to a website at 07:57:26 am two days later by a man who claims to share 3.12% of her father’s DNA.

I think about the technological miracle at my fingertips. It is a device that contains more information than I will ever need, where I can make connections to a short-lived existence many generations away from my own, this virtual landscape where I pack my own information, frozen pieces of time left to glow long after I am gone.

Still, my heart remains with the small, faded daguerreotype.

I cannot see her, but I know that Mary Ann Powers is chemically embalmed within the image created long ago by capturing the light reflecting off her body. I imagine her mother touching the object I now cradle on a cold February day with the sun peeking through the UV-protected windows of the reading room and illuminating the fragments on its glass, transforming it into a tiny galaxy. I imagine the collision of light, shadow, and chemistry that came together for a short period to create the photograph. Among the precise bits and bytes that increasingly shape my days, the cased photograph is an imperfect, tangible link to the past. Its atoms are akin to mine. They cling to a moment in time but slowly return piece by piece to nature’s embrace.

