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## Young Rembrandt, 1637

Before snow settles on the roof  
and even a mere thought of winter  
is something other people think,

there is that time when the chin  
in a portrait is lifted up,  
when seriousness in the eyes

is read as thoughtful ambition,  
a time to take on the world,  
to know time can be replaced,

the first easel, the first chair,  
and a table where works poured  
as if melt water from a glacier,

fresh but untouched in its path.  
He is wearing a painter's cap,  
as black as the one he recalls

years later when patrons  
posed like water in a rain storm  
on a mild December afternoon.

It is late in the day. The sun  
wants to lock up and go home —  
but in this instance the eyes

are bright enough to read by  
and they look into time  
to say spring waits just ahead

in a place he believes is April.  
Look into the future with him.  
Does he see the way ahead?

Such an image is a captive.  
The future finds it all familiar;  
yet the heart knows what it loves —

even so, it is better to remember  
what was than to forget,  
the taste of good, surprising wine

as beautiful as the first sip  
at the world's last supper  
to quench love's long test of life.

## Seven Magpies

When I lived in England  
and my train stopped at country stations  
there was always the feeling  
that someone beneath a farm field  
was staring back at me —

someone buried and forgotten,  
a village no longer extant,  
house and church and graveyard  
cobbler and carter, their wives and children  
and children's children  
all memory palimpsest  
as apples fallen where the tree stood

and if I disembarked and walked out  
in wellies through the brown-black earth  
I might be sucked under by history.

I don't have that feeling when a train  
stops at Bradford platform  
and the car fills with the pungent smell  
of green onions picked and ploughed under  
with the aroma of work and sweat still vital  
after a season in the Ontario sun;

that if I put my ear to the ground  
no one is calling out in agony  
as their flesh fails beneath the plague  
and the autumn wind consumes them  
with hunger and hoarfrost and namelessness

for among the deep tangle of weed roots  
and the worm eager to please as best he can  
all I hear is the silence of former trees  
gently giving up their leaves to autumn light  
and waiting for someone to remember they were here.

## Masterpieces

As Wilson Bentley photographed flakes in the barn of his Vermont farm, he knew that each unique creation passing before his eyes into the timelessness of forever was a small masterpiece that never again would grace the world as individual.

Today in the gallery, in each individual frame, I peered into small worlds. Flakes of art lovers' dust settled again and again on the varnished surfaces, and I knew that man is as much the enemy of forever as time, and our best efforts stand before

us as reminders of our brief lives. Before man learned to paint, he had the individual stars, the stories they told set forever against the unknown; in the cold, the flakes fell from heaven because heaven knew that even it was beyond permanence. Again,

I watch snowstorms, updrafts rising again and falling until the dance is madness before the emptiness of death. Wilson Bentley believed that the universe was ruled by an individual mind constantly seeking a singular snowflake, the brevity that is beauty. Nothing lasts forever.



Art and snowstorms are reminders that forever is a rare moment when nothing dies, yet again, nature mistakes originality for effort; snowflakes, each unique, must be crafted in time before time's end. The storms will exhaust individual possibilities to prove there are limits we knew

to exist, but have never proven. If we knew the end of things, we might stop trying, and forever lose that vision that makes us individual, that *maniera* so frail yet so strong we gain purpose, testing our minds before our time ends. We are kin to snowflakes,

and if we knew we were a beauty that never again will exist, we would struggle to last forever before we melt, leaving a tear as individual as a snowflake.

## The Anatomy of Tea

*for Ida Evelyn Reid Miller, 1893–1975*

The bottom of every china cup  
held the magic of the future  
and the sadness of the past.  
As if looking into a pool

for a reflection of the moon,  
or the night sky for strength,  
Ida conjured a rainy hillside  
of a northern Indian mountain

as a phrase she could taste,  
bitter on the tip of her tongue.  
It was prophecy. Sad memories  
of a fallen empire, the sun

setting through a kitchen window,  
the room darker by the minute  
as if leaves set to steep  
the length of the Lord's Prayer —

and wherever the prayer brewed  
the word spread for good or bad  
until a map bled bright red  
into a cup of hibiscus zinger.

I came home exhausted tonight.  
It is still winter, and flowers  
are fragments of ancient history.  
An emperor's jasmine bloomed

with the scent of a spring garden  
filled with a perfume of divine April,  
and it rose from the twisting vapours  
where a dancer with brass cymbals

rang the clear bright notes  
to revive that haunting instinct  
to stand between time and eternity  
where the view of terraced slopes

and the thought of rain vanishing  
over celadon-coloured mountains  
left me feeling I could breathe again.  
I could see so clearly in the twilight

to the bottom of the warm cup,  
and I grasped in my cold hands  
the sparkling serenity after rain  
of Buddha beneath the banyan tree.

## Crystal Set

On summer nights I would drop a wire  
from the sill of my bedroom window  
and with a headset  
split like a wishbone  
sing along to a night of stars —

Elvis Presley, Perry Como —  
each broken-hearted troubadour  
telling me to fall in love;

for even powerless tunes were magic,  
and all the melodies that filled my head  
from an earphone tucked beneath my pillow  
could not answer the questions of life  
that outlived the music  
inside my mind.

I want to remember how I listened,  
but to amplify such innocence,  
the passing charms and distant signals  
received through the ash tree of my backyard,  
would ask the heart to listen harder  
and betray the litany of a popular song;

so I remain faithful to what is powerless  
to hear the evidence of things not seen,  
and catch the music of a wishing-star  
as fragile as a crystal sphere  
when it crackles from the end of time.