

## Chapter 16: Winter Warmth



Minute birds!

## Minute Birds

Delicate leaves tethered firmly,  
lofty flexible branches.  
Thick, husky trunk.  
Herculine roots.  
Intense summer heat,  
pounding rains, high winds.  
Resilience.

Celebrating the winds,  
leaves dream of flying.  
Free, high.  
Risky of course.  
Security clings to the mighty tree.  
Food and water provided.  
Safety in numbers  
from tiny aggressive creatures  
that savor succulent fibers.

But when the winds blow,  
leaves dream...  
Envyng feathered kites  
soaring high overhead.  
Now that's living!



Summer passes,  
winds grow calm.  
Cold sets in,  
winds pick up.  
Leaves grow tired and weak  
while dreams hold fast.

And then...  
before the first snowflakes,  
a letting go...  
And for just a moment,  
they hang still in mid air,  
free for the first time.

Sensing their joy of a new beginning,  
as the winds let out a long breath  
and quietly, gracefully,  
the rainbow colored flakes soar high...  
And for a long, lovely minute --  
they can fly!

Do birds ever wish they were leaves  
secured by the roots of a tree?



Welcome home!  
Rocks and stream are here to greet the leaves  
who are the newest residents of the forest floor.



All your friends are here!



How will I rise from this? How do I start over?  
I leave such questions to the past.  
Every stage is change, a transition from one form to the next.



Without making a sound, a soft blanket of white powder spreads over the leaves, marking the beginning of a new season.



Instinctively Darwin samples the snow  
as if it was nothing new to him.



With Darwin, I am fourteen - again. Only this time, I admit I know nothing.  
I allow him to be my teacher and the wilderness my institution of higher learning.



"Mr. Mark, do you mind if I lead?"



I follow him into the woods, his nose taking him in directions I wouldn't have considered, picking up intriguing scents under the fallen snow.



To me, it appears as if we're alone and always have been.



There's no sign that someone has been here before.  
But Darwin pauses, puzzled about something near a large rock.

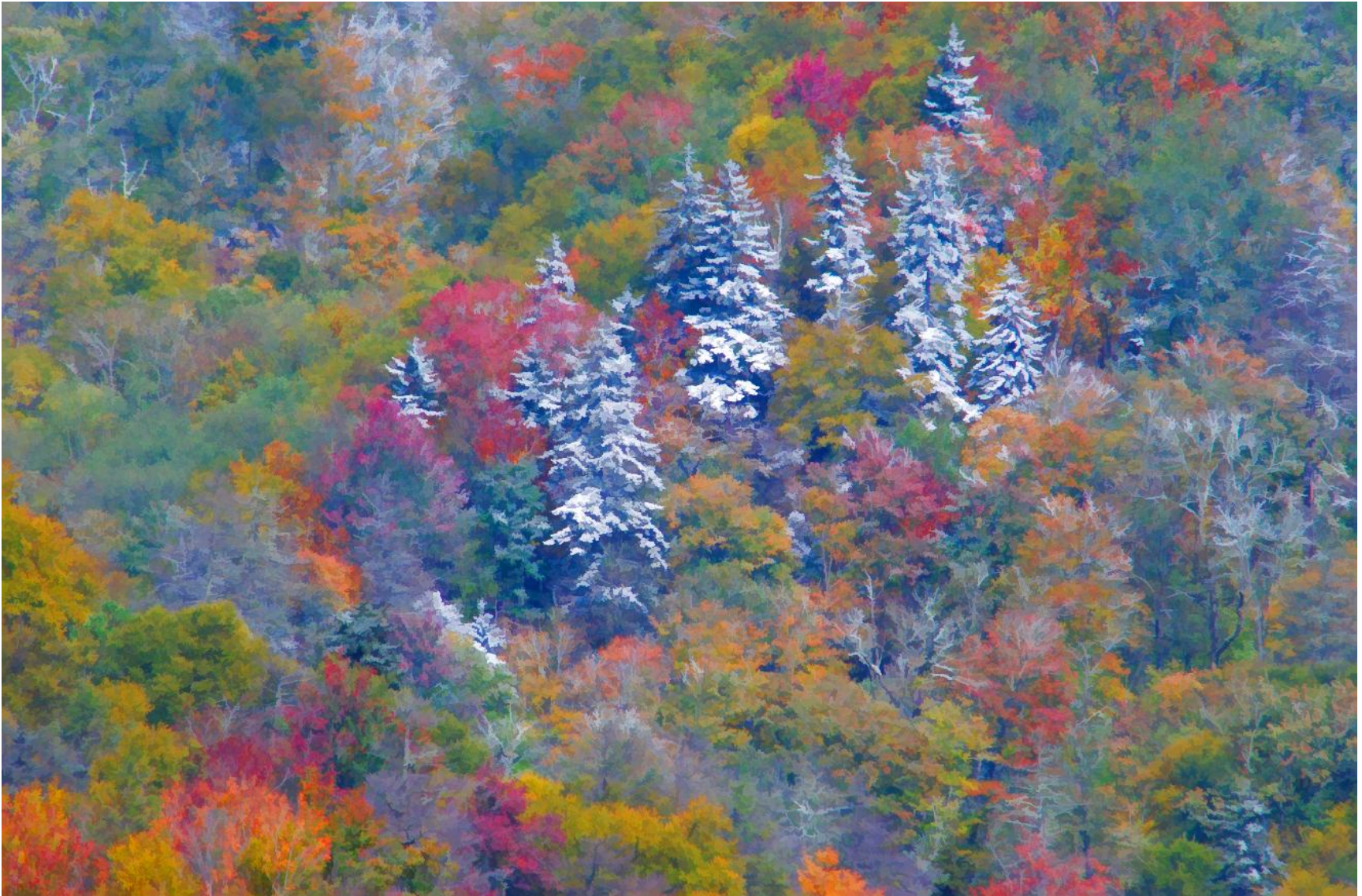


His curiosity and innocence move me. Does he know about transitions too? Is he aware that life passes, or if he is so filled with the moment that such thoughts aren't important to his kind?



That magical moment when the mountains begin to release autumn and are embraced by winter.

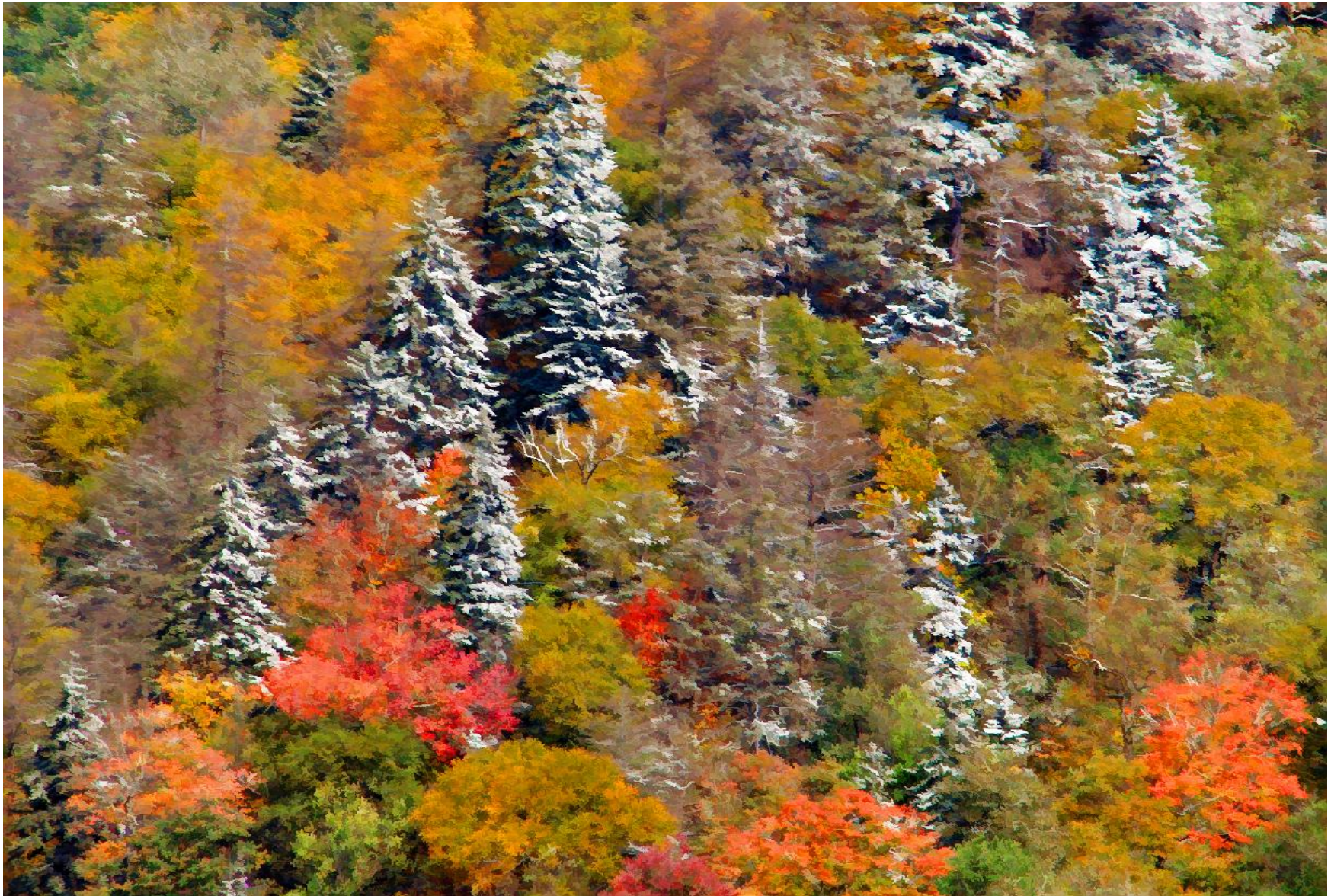
We all love life or wish we could.  
For me, it has been absolutely beautiful.  
I know it's temporary,  
at least as it relates to me  
as a lowly human.  
I am not immortal.  
I never believed I was.  
There will come a time of nothingness for "me"  
But all the energy that held me together  
both in body and spirit  
will simply move on  
and perhaps never look back.  
I am not afraid.  
I devour that energy  
and it devours me.  
It soars through my existence  
like Darwin  
and the leaves and snow.  
My attempt to understand it  
in scientific terms  
makes it no less miraculous.



Love, hope and charity - I have experienced them all as both giver and receiver.



As a recent gray hair, I continue to seek truths. I want to understand and commune with the seasons of life as I would a dear friend.



There are places and moments nature shares with only one person  
at a time...and perhaps one dog.



Old Man Wind sleeps through such gentle moments.



I am amazed that natural colors work so well together with a light snow.  
Autumn creates many masterpieces.



If blind, could I hear the snow as it lands?



Chilled clouds take refuge in the tree tops.



Happy clutter.

## Happy Clutter

What I see in nature may not be what you see. True, we're looking at the same critter or landscape or ecosystem. But once our brains process the scene before us, we may interpret the information in different ways.

Recently, a friend called my photography "cluttered". My ego was lightly bruised at first, but then I realized he was right. At that point, I could have said to myself, "Okay self, from now on there will be no clutter in your photos!", and then set out to look for images more tidy. But in describing what he saw as a fault, my friend had inadvertently explained to me what makes me happy.

"You like clutter, don't you?" whispered that inner voice again.

"Yep."

"So why fight it?"

I reckon I don't see clutter as clutter. I see a sense of order in patterns within patterns within patterns. When I gaze through an old growth cypress swamp, I see a pattern to the randomness of tree placement and spacing; of girths and heights. I see patterns of variation in the shades of green cypress needles or the pleasing curvature of dozens of cypress knees. Yes, it's chaotic-looking and cluttered, if I am looking for a single focal point like one particular old tree, or an egret on a branch. But it's difficult for me to see nature in isolation. I'm moved by all of it, so I tend to photograph it in large swaths, or collections of patterns. That's what pleases me so that's what I capture and share.



Autumn popsicles



Grand clutter.

## Cosmic Clutter

Because of random mutations—Charles Darwin's wonderfully defined mechanism for describing changes in a genomic sequence — our entire planet is in a constant state of array and disarray. What looks like perfect order is just that - if we freeze-frame the moment with our camera. But look back in time a second, an hour, a day, a decade or a century and we would see a different image. Look ahead a thousand years or a million and we realize all living things are constantly changing on a microscopic and macroscopic level.

On a grand scale, operating on a somewhat similar principal, the planets and stars in our Milky Way galaxy appear to move gracefully, with near perfect orbital patterns. But in the midst of all that perfection is Andromeda, a smaller galaxy on a possible collision course with the Milky Way some 3 to 5 billion years from now. Astronomers believe Andromeda may have collided with at least one other galaxy in the past.

Both galaxies contain over 100 billion stars, which is 100 million trillion possible collisions. In spite of these numbers, the odds that even 2 stars would collide are slim at best because of the vast distances between them.

One person might look at this big picture and conclude that the Universe and all the stars and planets are in perfect balance, while another person sees large-scale chaos.

Is it possible they've both got it right?



How can such beautiful scenes be so temporary? Let the wind blow or darkness set in, and everything changes.

## **My Reality**

My reality is here, not just in today's wilderness, which itself is grand, but in the more ancient natural world with which I am indirectly connected. Through evolution, I was delivered here as a somewhat temporary and reluctant host for all kinds of smaller organisms that use me as surely as I use Earth's bountiful but not unlimited resources.

Whether by accident or divine intent, I have been here before on so many biological levels. Parts of me will be back again and again indefinitely, recycling the planet's energy, until our sun finally dims and all that I am will be scattered endlessly throughout the Universe. Such thoughts both humble and comfort me.

Perfection, chaos

Ying, Yang.

Creation, evolution

The Divine and Big Bang.



After their loss of leaves, do trees welcome the white cloak of winter?



Snow on fire.



Even the moon is dusted in white.

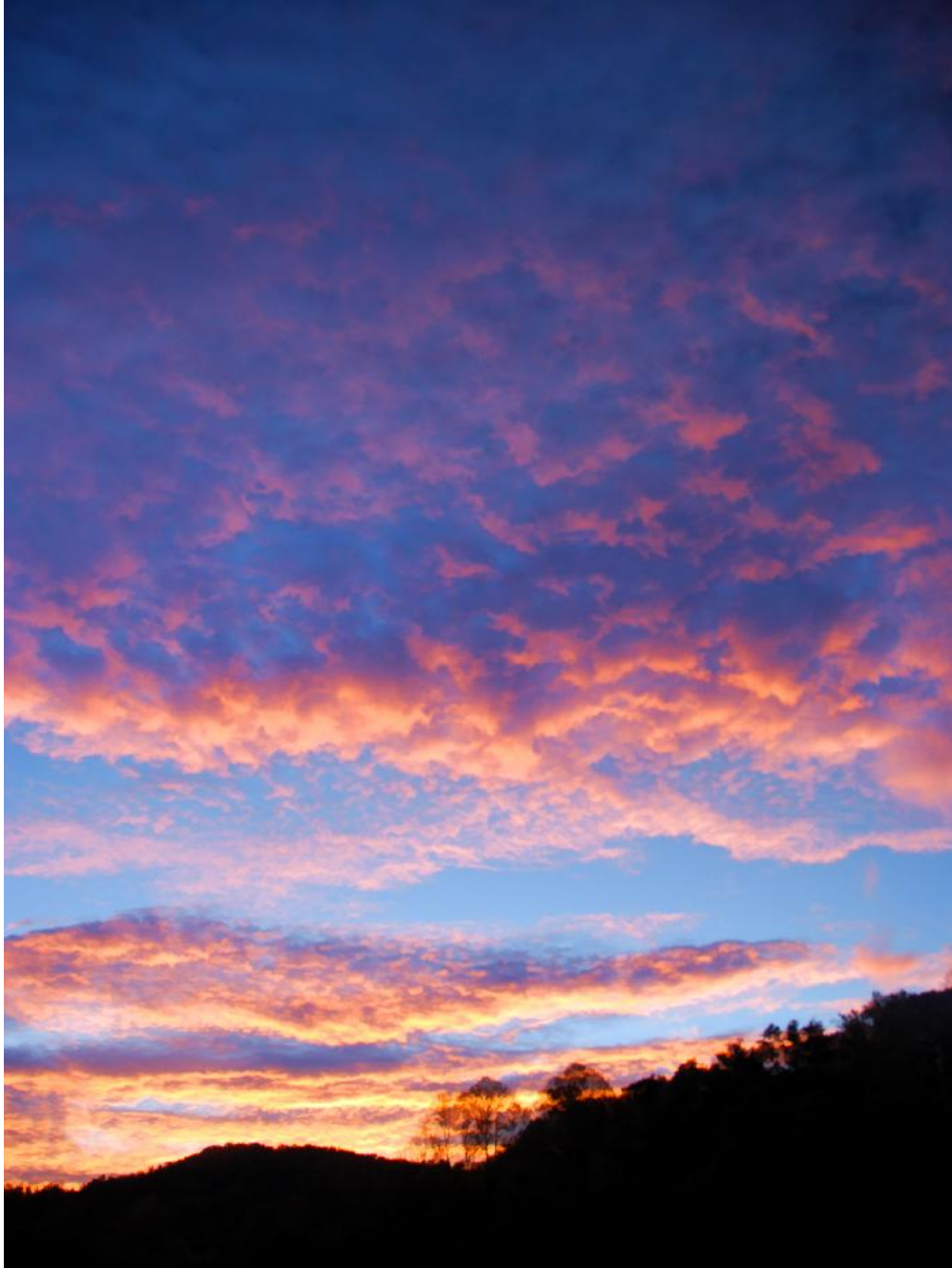


Sunset consumes the leaves.



"Well, let's go home, Darwin."

"That was some trip, wasn't it Mr. Mark?"



"It sure was."

"So where are you taking me next time?"

"Where would you like to go?"

"I don't care, just so we go..."