

What the Hand Remembers

My grandmother kept her buttons in an old Danish biscuit tin. It was blue, with a dent in one corner from when it fell off a shelf during the 1989 earthquake. There were maybe four thousand buttons in there. Most had been cut from clothes before they were thrown away: shirts with worn collars, coats the children had outgrown, even a wedding dress ruined in a flood. By then, some of those children had grandchildren of their own.

When I was little, she would empty the tin onto the kitchen table and let me sort them. Sometimes I put them into colours, sometimes sizes. I'd make one pile for buttons with two holes and another for those with four.

One day, when I was about seven, I asked which was her favourite.

She found a plain brown button with a small chip in it.

"That was your grandfather's," she said. "From the coat he wore the day he asked me."

I doubt I would have picked it out myself. There were prettier buttons, larger ones, ones that caught the light. This one looked like something you might find loose in a drawer. But after she told me, I looked at it differently.

You could have taken the clearest photograph in the world and still missed the reason she had kept it. You needed her to tell you.

This week, I asked a machine to write a poem about a button tin. It took four seconds.

The poem was quite good. It had a grandmother, a blue tin and a kitchen table. It rhymed "thread" with "said" and reached love and loss somewhere around the third stanza. If I had come across it in a magazine, I probably would have finished it.

I asked for another. That was good too. Then another.

By the twentieth, I had plenty to choose from. I just wasn't sure what I was looking for anymore. Each poem had the right sort of details. Each could make a reasonable claim on my attention. I could ask for more all afternoon.

It reminded me of the buttons spread across the table. Having them in front of me was one thing. Knowing which one I wanted to keep was another.

For a long time, a large part of being an artist has been having the skill and patience to make something. Drawing a convincing horse. Holding a melody together. Writing ten thousand words that someone else might want to read. We have built schools, prizes and careers around those abilities.

Now, many of those things can be produced in a few moments. It's a big change, and I don't think we've quite worked out what to make of it yet.

I still care about the effort involved. There is something valuable in staying with a difficult piece of work, learning how to do it and gradually getting it right. I would be sorry to see that dismissed as unnecessary.

But generating all those poems made me notice how much of the work happens in deciding what matters.

A painter spending a month on a canvas makes hundreds of choices along the way. A month of painting gives you time to work through those choices. When part of the making is handed over to a machine, the decisions are still there. Someone has to look at the result and decide whether it says what they wanted to say.

Sometimes that means keeping a line. Sometimes it means rewriting it, even though there is nothing obviously wrong with it. It reads well, but you would never say it that way.

A curator I once interviewed told me that finding good work was rarely her biggest problem. There was plenty of it. The difficult part was leaving good work out.

She talked about the hundred excellent pieces that couldn't be included if the twelve in the exhibition were going to have room to be seen.

I have thought about that conversation a lot lately.

With so much available, choosing may become a larger part of what we do. We will have to get better at recognising what we care about, and at passing over things that are impressive but don't quite belong in the work we are trying to make.

That might mean deleting nineteen perfectly decent poems. Or closing an image of a beautiful sunset because, for whatever reason, you would rather go outside.

I don't think this makes generated work worthless. Some of it is useful, some of it is moving, and some of it helps people make things they couldn't otherwise have made. The words and images are recognisable partly because they draw on things people have already noticed and tried to express.

A machine can produce a convincing poem about a grandmother's button tin. It can include the kind of details that make us remember our own kitchens and our own grandmothers.

What it cannot get from producing the poem is my connection to that particular brown button.

I could give it the story. It could repeat it, explain it, perhaps write a better version of it. But I would still be the one who heard my grandmother say those words at the kitchen table.

My grandmother died in the spring, and the tin came to me.

I haven't sorted it. I'm not sure I want to yet. She knew where so many of the buttons had come from, and most of those stories went with her.

A machine could help me catalogue them. I could have a tidy record of their colours, sizes and number of holes. That would be useful, perhaps. There would still be a great deal I couldn't put in the record.

The brown button is in a small dish beside my bed now.

I know which one it is because she took the time to show me. Out of all those buttons, she picked it up and told me why she had kept it.

So I keep it too.