

# A Snowflake through Time

by  
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Three inches of snow fell in Belgium the other night and the entire country skidded to a halt. Flights were cancelled, cars abandoned mid-journey. Aerial views showed a land transformed, from the usual winter wallflower dressed in browns and greys to a beauty in ermine.

The moist breath of the English Channel is forever pushing the temperature above freezing here. You can't beat it for atmosphere, that's for sure: cobbled squares seeping into the mist; dark overcoats in the fog. The seeds of a brooding novel lie on every corner.

Twenty years ago, I thought that my first, snowless winter in Brussels was an aberration – that the snow had simply overshot, and landed in Germany by mistake. But there was no mistake. Belgium does not lie in a snow belt. When passing storms do, in a moment of largesse, drop a few flakes from time to time, children hungry for winter dash to the little valley in the park across the street to sled on frozen grass.

But now, three inches, no less!

I can hear what you're thinking: *three inches?* Saints alive! That's a flurry over here; a mere dusting. You lily-livered Europeans! We don't even need snow tires for that kind of thing.

And I know what you mean. Growing up in Pennsylvania, we had winters like yours. The ground disappeared under snow for weeks at a time. It was only when drifts were large enough to swallow a Saint Bernard that the schools even closed. We would wake to gauzy silence, and then that joyous augur: the scrape of a plough. We parted the curtains and gasped: the world as we knew it was gone! It had become a giant's boudoir, the bushes puffy, over-sized chairs, with mountains of cotton wool for our pleasure.

Those distant Pennsylvania winters have entered myth now. But I think of them when I wonder past the Flemish masters in the Brussels art museum. What winters they had back in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders! Snowy village scenes are caught alive in Brueghel's oil and wood like ornamental birds in a cage. He captured forever the amber moisture in the air; he brought to life the polished lead of frozen canals, and skies cracked like old china by gaunt, naked branches. You can almost hear the merry shouts of the villagers – the whicker of their skates along the ice; the desolate rasp of a crow. Something brushes against your neck in the museum: Brueghel's twilight, perhaps, lifting from the oils.

What has happened to those Belgian winters of old? It's as if they have vanished into history along with Brueghel's villages. You can find the exact fields he painted, and the ancient church spires. But the winters are no more, melted away long ago into the flat, muddy land where the villagers lie buried.

But are they really extinct, those winters? I venture out into the three, fresh inches of snow and wonder.

The city is paralyzed, the traffic idling. Children are rushing to the park with old wooden sleds, plastic tubs and bags - anything that might slide. I follow them, and wonder if their memories will be like mine. Maybe they, too, will create a myth from all this: tall tales of snow that went over the knees - even though the knees in question were so much closer to the ground back then; of sleds travelling at the speed of light - though only down the little dip in the parkland. But the myth must have some truth, don't you think? Because I'm sure that you, too, can still feel the zing of snow crystals against your teeth as you sped, laughing, down the hill.

The park is mobbed. Children are pushing to be the next to launch themselves over the edge. I glance up: the sky has an amber cast, and across it splinters a black tracery of trees. A crow hunches high above the merriment, darkly, like a wizard. He rises suddenly with a primitive mutter, and the sound echoes through the centuries right back to Brueghel.

I realize then that if the spirit of Brueghel's winter is still alive, four hundred years on, then surely the mythical snows of childhood have not yet melted.