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## Ekphrasis: A Dutch-American Farmer Looks at Bruegel

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# Ekphrasis: A Dutch-American Farmer Looks at Bruegel

## **Abstract**

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Return of the Herd* (1565) is the subject of a dramatic poetic treatment and the point of departure for a fictional journey concerning Bruegel's famous picture "the lost season." The Ekphrasis is an extended version of a Prologue and Epilogue for an in-progress novel.

## **About the Author**

Dr. Keith Fynaardt's research—and life—explores the intersection of agriculture and the humanities. In addition to writing and teaching about modern agriculture's impact on Midwestern croplands and communities, he also is restoring a historic Sioux County farm. His work has led to the development of courses like Literature of the Agricultural Imagination and Writing the Farm. His other scholarly interests are narrative nonfiction writing, contemporary American literature and film, and the agri-business industry. Fynaardt held the Northwestern College Endowed Professorship from 2001 to 2006.

## Ekphrasis:

### A Dutch-American Farmer Looks at Bruegel

by Keith Fynaardt, Ph.D.

Consider Flemish master Pieter Bruegel’s painting The Return of the Herd from 1565. In a custom as old as domestication, peasants move livestock home from summer pastures to shelter in winter barns—a cattle drive, in other words, in an early modern Netherlandish style. A late



*The Return of the Herd* (1565) by Pieter Bruegel. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

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medieval atmosphere clings to the scene, but the subject is movement in a time of change. Their autumn roundup is a modest affair—17 head of cattle trod a familiar path, the cows eager for their stalls and evening milking, and the steers, fattened on the salad days of summer pasture, are eager for the manger, trusting their drovers have stacked enough hay and fodder to bring them through the winter months. The drovers too are keen for home. They see the storm clouds gather, know the season is ending, and sense it in their beasts. A hard day on the trail ends with aching feet and hunger; the best days end seated at dinner.

The halt and lame share a different end. Pasture life is marked by hazard: thorn bushes can take an eye, rabbit holes fracture legs, sharp rocks cause hoof-rot, and packs of nocturnal canines lurk, all teeth and claws, at the ragged borders of the fields where yearlings wander off—wolves willing to leave the hunt behind and take easy pickings from the civilized herd. The journey home is dangerous, a deep river crossing, a steep eroding path from which a sudden ledge drops and roots hang exposed. The drovers move among the herd, urging the cattle forward with long prods beyond the reach of hind leg kicks; one guards the edge.

They know their animals by breed and by character—the Chianina and Limousin are skittish alone, nervous and unruly, but with the herd they submit, happy to follow nose to tail. The Bazadais are always eating; they will stop mid-stride to steal a bite, oblivious to the stumbling chain reaction they cause all down the line. Would that they all had the temperament of the Brown Swiss. They would need no herding but come home with a rattle of the trough and a cattle-call. But the Charolais are obstinate and hate the pen—all Auroch, as if domestication didn't take. Especially one of the Simmental steers, who since birth—now three years and three

months ago in the tall grass of a deep draw, from which it emerged mysteriously, a solitary calf, miraculous—has acted as if it knows the ancestral herd roams still in the wilds of eastern forests, great with the ancient beasts of dreams, and might someday bolt, live among them and devolve. It's best not to prod that one and a moot point besides, for on the trail, on the treacherous riverbank, it stumbled, jostled by the others at a crack of thunder and caught a hind-leg in the crotch of a branch of a driftwood tree.

In a stubborn instant it lunged, forcing the hoof tight between hard limbs. The tree was shorn of bark and the bleached wood abrasive holding the leg fast, and the steer froze for a moment as if assessing its condition or deliberating. Jerking in violent pluses impossibly quick, the muscle fibers shivered. The fringed hair of the fetlock darkened as the skin tore between wood and bone. Helpless it bawled, thrashed its head with dewlaps heavy and fell on one knee. Terror flickered in the bulbous eyes spinning down. A drover stepped in and scared it back to standing, but the steer couldn't conceive of a simple step backwards, instead lunging forward on bull-remembered strength. A horseman tossed a lariat around the horns but couldn't secure it in time, and with a violent head toss, the steer whipped the rope through his hands. Burns rose on his naked palms. Watching, the drovers waited with the silent herd for the suffering to run its course. The dogs retreated to lie in the shade above the river, snouts on paws—respectful and prescient in the way of dogs. They smelled the fatal urgency and heard a snapping sound as the hoof came free, dangling loose on broken cartilage. On three legs the steer could still run, and did: ribs heaving, vain gasps stringing from nostrils wide with sure knowledge it galloped ahead into the village, an awful sight with that hoof hanging. Mercifully Bruegel has painted it deep in

shadow under the cover of trees where it is nearly impossible to see. But it’s one more job before this roundup is complete, butcher knives and smokehouse fires—and it’s curious how accidents provide.

More pioneering herds than Bruegel’s have already crossed the Atlantic, their drovers prophets of the gauchos and vaqueros who birthed a tradition that will stampede across Texas 300 years later. Indeed, by 2017 the North American cattle-drive corridor is home to roughly 40 million head of beef cattle alone, and dairy cows number nearly 270 million globally. Added together, their milk, protein, leather, draft power, and fertile manure, not to mention their ineffable spirit arising from that large-bodied and docile (when unprovoked) disposition is, in a word, bovine, and yields up the sum of a deity— for some worship what others eat while others worship what they eat.

Here in Flanders, in the middle of the 16th century, the peace and quiet of cows will reign when all are bedded down before night falls and the storm breaks. Warm loam and snug houses, watery green fields and canals to drain them, ponds for ice skating in winter, and flat township roads—ripe for a 20th century bicycle stampede—rise into the folded coal hills of the Ardennes: landscapes familiar to and made famous by Bruegel. The Return, however, with its craggy granite peaks and sharp changes in elevation—a river cuts against mountain roots with its mouth at sea-level, the cattle path rises sharply as it approaches the foothills and meets the eye high in the foreground—is unlike any landscape found in the lowlands. Bruegel is painting from memory, recalling Swiss herds and Alpine scenes as much as he’s thinking about home or looking out his studio windows. The influence of the mountain landscapes he experienced on his

years-long trip to Italy is evidently as important as his viewing of Italian Renaissance art. In fact, a river cutting through a lowland landscape flanked by minor Alps receding to the horizon is nearly as common in Bruegel’s oeuvre as his scenes of village life. His late and magnificent The Magpie on the Gallows (1568) is placed in a nearly identical landscape as that of The Return. Unlike his Swiss counterparts, however, where alpine herds are brought down from highland pastures in autumn, Bruegel’s herd is clearly being driven up the path into the higher foreground before turning a corner on a gentle downslope toward the village. His imaginary landscape combines lowland pastures in the distance and mountains rising beside them with a highland village to which the cows come home. Upland fields are visible at the extreme right, but they are vineyards, not pasture; and because the cows are pushed up prominently in the foreground with the river chasing toward the distant plain, the eye is drawn along it in a convincing illusion of depth as the eye retraces the cow path. In the space created, Bruegel collapses the activities of autumn and the atmosphere of Reformation-age Flanders into one snapshot: Beyond the drovers a figure leans hard, pulling the line of a bird net trap; beyond that workers move along the cordons of grapevines, and further on a human figure hangs from the gallows next to several torture wheels, all of which set a stage for the main action of the cattle drive. Drawn from memory as well as observation, the picture is as visionary as it is documentary, and likewise the attention of the viewer is engaged by the literal picture as much as the viewer’s imagination is inspired to see with the mind’s eye and tell the story of the picture. See the sudden vistas, sheer drops, and goat trails; recall crossing mountain streams on bridges so rickety as to hazard the soul, dangling as in myth above the rocks, and the water below glittering emerald like a swift

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glass coffin, so sublime and mesmerizing (especially to the lowland traveler), falling in sudden foaming cataracts, so magnetic, that the urge to jump and be carried away is almost overwhelming—to give exhausted legs a rest and float on bliss for a moment; then plunge to oblivion.

North a few clicks of Bruegel’s stomping ground, an ordinary Dutch village, Fijnaardt—an old crow-stepped gable kind of place that Bruegel would have found familiar enough—lies low near the wide mouth of Holland’s Diep. It’s in the neighborhood of Breda, one of the places where Bruegel is thought to have been born. And who knows, given the mystery surrounding his birth, perhaps it was. On a map the rivers of the lowlands look like a handful of thick fingers spread out and draining that part of continental Europe that lies north and west of the Alps into the North Sea. Part of the immense greater-Rhine delta, they run between the thumb of Antwerp and the pinkie of Rotterdam—a couple of block and tackle seaport hubs as bustling today as they were in Bruegel’s time. And the dike-building Dutch were already hard at it, reclaiming and protecting from the sea land on which to raise grain and grow grass to feed the cities, not knowing, at the time, that the best dike is a glacier. Still, it’s better that they rolled up their proverbial sleeves, donned wooden shoes, and got to work building civilization—draining the silty-muck to dry land, solving problems they could see—instead of sitting on their hands worrying and carping about unintended consequences. Once dried, the fertile soil was confirmation enough that the work they did was good, and it seemed like a promise of prosperity for all. But the old threat of flood and the famine that follows—not to mention toxic pestilence incubating in that wet and yet-invisible microbial world—withered stalks, shrunk pods, and held



populations in check. In Bruegel’s time another threat, the horror of religious warfare, raged across the lowlands. Ancient musings, worries as natural as the fear of death, wonderment about a life hereafter, and speculation on the nature of consciousness devolved into armed conflict. In this particular time and place, the newly hatched Protestants and old guard Catholics in their respective self- righteous, zealous, galvanized, blood-feud raging—under the name of the church and of God—tortured, beheaded, and buried their kin alive. Bruegel painted his way through the terror, negotiating a world of shocking violence, new-found wealth, and waves of progress and decline. Others fled, some by choice, scattering like the cattle of Europe, to graze American grass.

The visual language of The Return of the Herd is the point of departure for our theme. The drovers are pleased by the weight their cattle have put on, bellies are popping, and they’re certainly proud to have a Friesian-Holstein in the bunch—always the best milkers. The peasants are difficult to distinguish from their animals because Bruegel has painted them all in the same shades of tan and brown and black: the drovers in leather jerkins, woolen tunics, and canvas, and the cattle in hides dappled, belted, and roan. The whole of the countryside has been done up in the same palette, and the cattle and peasants blend into it, framed as they are by the woods and fields. As a foreground feature, they take up less than a third of the picture with a vast deep-focused panorama beyond—fully camouflaged or, better, subsumed by their world, by the decayed gold of the stubble fields and rusted leaves and the embrace of a wide-armed vista; they melt into the landscape, disappearing down the path to the village. And because the point-of-view is from behind the herd, all but a few faces are turned away or obscured under wide-

brimmed hats and caps pulled down tight. Individual characters so muted, the focus turns to the group, to the pattern and ritual of rural life. The absence of facial expression sends the eye in search of other drama, which it finds in playful movement, in the jaunty strides of neighbors arriving to help. Note how they gather behind the herd, where they're not needed, but it's a social! Or perhaps they've arrived to help with the butchering, as each carries a belt-knife. One senses that rarin'-to-go anticipation of fall and feels the coming cold, an excitement rooted in the knowledge that not all will survive winter, that some are, indeed, on the menu. Bruegel's kin seem to get that, that the business of mammalian life can be summed up in a squirt of milk. The milk, most of it, feeds the young, of course, but often it's sprayed in a pail and sold to the neighbors, or curdled and pressed into a round gouda cheese; sometimes it's wasted, spilled on the ground, and inevitably, even the best milkers dry up. Puckish perhaps, Bruegel's picture, but a vital drama and a necessary, if droll, reminder of life's brief effort.

Imagine the sound of the lowing of cattle, flanks jostling, and hooves clattering on stone, tracks puffed in the dirt. An old paint-horse riding rear-guard clopping, comfortable in his easy task, happy to ride herd on dull-witted cows. Sharp barks crack from among sudden quick-scissoring legs and the drovers call out, commanding the dogs, urging the herd and the season onward in the ancient vernacular of man and beast. As they round the bend, these sounds—the sounds of our history on this planet in its wide-rolling orbit, entwined among our favored peers—rise and diminish as they pass. Beyond the cow-path, the land falls away to a quiet meandering river and the late grassy fields to the sea. Mountains frame the valley, amplifying the

storm clouds’ thundering up the draw. Today the season changes; the drovers prod their animals, lean into the wind, listen for the sounds of home, and yearn for day’s end.

Loitering, the Friesian-Holstein looks back. She appears to be considering options she does not have—as cows will do—standing stock-still, center stage, she looks out. Her black-and-white hide glistens, sleek-fattened against the cold. She’s statuesque, almost iconic. With ears pricked and horns flashing, she’s a conduit, her gaze seeking ours. She’s stubborn behind the herd, eyeing the painter, bossy. She lets loose with a bellow of protest, neck-outstretched and tongue curled. But before her hot mooing breath is taken up into the fall mist, she turns toward the others, skittish in the wake of her own audacity, and joins them on the hazy trail home to their fate.



The Return of the Herd was commissioned for a remarkably prosperous house in a generally prosperous Antwerp, a city rich in sugar and spice and the merchants and shipping magnates thereof who wanted to show it off. It first hung with its companion pieces, a series of paintings called “the seasons of the months”—depictions of rural life, at work and at play—a popular genre with a religious past and a secular future and Bruegel a bridge between. Some critics think the original “months” might have included a full set of twelve paintings, others argue for four “seasons.” Most have settled on the notion, based on what evidence exists, that there were six in the original series—as each of the surviving pieces accounting for two months of each season (a practice common to the genre). But debate and speculation, thy name is Bruegel. Five pictures remain; one is lost, or seven, or perhaps one doesn’t belong. The five are

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currently held in prominence, gems of their respective museums: The Harvesters (August and September or high summer) was hied off to New York via Paris after Napoleon’s generals plundered it from Vienna and is the finest Bruegel in the Western Hemisphere. Haymaking (June and July or early summer) is in Prague and has a private room and a dedicated HVAC climate-control system, where one hopes it has a more restful 21st century than its pillaged and peripatetic 20th. And in Vienna, The Herd (October and November or autumn) along with Hunters in the Snow (December and January or winter) and The Gloomy Day (February and March or early spring) are ensconced among many other Bruegels, collected by the art-loving Habsburg court and now housed in the lavish Bruegel Room with its high ceilings and crown moldings where the works of “peasant Bruegel” appear as the only remaining princes of the once-upon-a-time kingdom. Call them priceless if you wish, but in the patois of the early 21st century auction house, the superlative means quite the opposite, for in those white-gloved hands art will indeed be listed and numbered and sold at a price—those hands like pawing kittens of the come-lately plutocrats, lapping after commissions. From behind their neo-classical columns the museums say that their Bruegels are not for sale, part of their permanent collections, they claim—if wishes were horses.

The lost season (spring)—in the way of all lost art, or stolen—has fueled speculation, dogged commitment, and strange fixation for centuries. So much is up for debate about Bruegel because so little can be pinned down: his place of birth, his cause of death, his views on the political-religious-economic-aesthetics of his day. Important questions each, no doubt, but above all else, it is the whereabouts, indeed the existence of, “the lost months” (April and May) that has

kept historians, curators, sleuths, and novelists, up into owl-eyed nights pouring over inventory lists and catalogs, tracking clues and spinning tales. Each of the extant pictures measures nearly four feet by five—painted big (with broad brush strokes, rough outlines, and gesso primer showing) for a big commission—Bruegel turning them out in a year. One can imagine the moment when the whole series was first hung: high along the crown of an immense dining room (it is surmised) on wood panels and framed into the wall-panels themselves mural-like, where they marked the year: a pictorial calendar of rural life just beyond Antwerp’s bustling streets. The idea to mark the seasons thus was an impulse as old as figure drawing on cave walls (human and bovine), and to hang them in a dining room, like comfort food. Now they are individual pieces heavily framed behind rope stanchions in majestic rooms where they have washed up, like so much flotsam, in winning cities where they will stay until the next go-round. Doubly famous, the images have been reproduced on every conceivable gift-shop trinket and are as commonly seen by the roiling masses in the blandest form of kitsch—t-shirts, key-chains, and tableware—as they are in the stilled gallery atmosphere by the privileged hoard. Bruegel wouldn’t complain; however rustic or urbane the crowd, he moved easily in both worlds. In our age, advances in optics and data streams have made it possible to see master works far from distracting crowds, far from gallery staging. In a new world of virtual ownership and digital reproduction, the paintings appear in a flood of images online, where a copy might be produced on a screen and details magnified with a click to a resolution sharper than the eye can perceive.

In the pictures themselves is as much nostalgia as one is predisposed to: jolly red-cheeked peasants, rumps like loaves of bread, wheels of cheese, and inside jokes; alternatively,

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there's plenty in view of an unvarnished history, of a past best left behind: the games depicted are sometimes blood-sport, the butt-end of cattle prods are used for cudgels on human bone as well, and the butchery, not bovine but sapien, on wood-spoke wheels is raised high on posts where all can see the powers that be and the lessons of their enforcement. Carrion birds patrol and help themselves. One can almost hear the hammers striking nails, the rasping saws, and scraping planes, as the wealthy burgher, Nicolaes Jongelinck, oversees the carpenters hanging the panels, adjusting for level, admiring his room where he could eat his fill and see what he wanted in his new acquisitions. But in three short years, Bruegel is dead, and Jongelinck dies the following year. The paintings live on—on the move—and their known history quickly fades to guessing. Almost as soon as he took possession, Jongelinck had offered them as collateral for a neighbor's back-taxes on wine sales—and keep in mind that Jongelinck hung the seasons in his suburban house outside the protection of Antwerp's city walls, a remarkably large house even by the standards of his merchant-class drinking buddies who did plenty of business with the same Habsburg court that supported Bruegel and his studio. After Jongelinck's death only a few seasons of months pass, and the bucolic elements of the imagery are indeed overwhelmed by those of violence. Antwerp is sacked by the Catholic Spanish Habsburgs in 1576. Wide swaths of the city are burned, burghers and peasants alike, massacred, the art saved. Simmering conflicts over a reformation of theology and a transformation of economy, boil over and, for the next eighty years more-or-less, soak the lowlands in blood. After all, if the Reformation-minded Dutch have a cash flow as wide as the Rhine delta, pockets as deep as udders, new ideas about religion through personal literacy, and pictures from artists like Bruegel who show them images

of themselves, not only those of saints, thereby helping them imagine a world out from under the pretense of kings and of church hierarchy—revolution cannot be far off. Of course their Habsburg rulers saw something quite different in Bruegel, something worth funding and protecting from heretical iconoclasts—those radicals who met in secret under the cover of night and woods, and ran rampant across their own neighborhoods and towns vandalizing religious paintings, stained glass, and statuary in hundreds and hundreds of their own churches, and crushing the spirit of artistic expression in their progeny ever since.

The seasons surface in 1594, noted as a gift (or tribute) from officials of the city of Antwerp to the latest Habsburg overlord, Archduke Ernst, who moves them to the seat of court in Brussels. He dies the following year, and his brother Rudolf, Holy Roman Emperor—the one with an eye for the arts—takes possession and has them moved to Prague with his royal collections. So the story the goes. By the time Archduke Leopold William finally gives up his attempt to rule the Spanish Netherlands and returns to Vienna, he, the grandest of all Habsburg art collectors, takes the seasons with the rest of the hoard, including many other Bruegels, and locks them in his palace in Vienna, never to return to the lowlands—except, of course, for the one that has gone missing, and the one that stayed in Prague. The three remaining in Vienna witness every bloody and beautiful thing Central Europe came to be over four centuries—of particular importance for our times is that of the great Ottoman invasion, which was halted at its gates on September 11, 1683.

It is worth noting how remarkable it was for a painter to feature ordinary people both in their work and in their play, presenting them as both admirable and deplorable creatures—that is

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to say, fully human—instead of following the established conventions of the genre. To wit: The early A.D. church Psalter becomes the Breviary becomes the Book of Hours and by the 16th century the wealth of Flemish patrons propels the ornamentation of such books—devotionals outlining a rigorous method of self-reflection and discipline which included prayers, psalms, a calendar of feast days, and gospel excerpts to guide daily, hour-by-hour, personal obedience—toward heights of bejeweled embossed luxury never before seen. Books become works of visual art, not only as decorative objects that contain language, but the words and letters as visual objects themselves, blurring the distinction between the visual and textual realms. While richly decorated, the imagery nevertheless remained conventional in that the pictures simply retold or reinforced the church’s approved interpretation of the quoted scripture, or the pictures were mere stand-ins for the words for the illiterate. Bruegel’s pictures are a remarkable development because they are not subordinate to language, nor are they dependent on language for their exposition. Which is not to say that there was anything distinctly Protestant about Bruegel’s art, any more than he was painting icons. While his contemporaries waged pitched battles in the latest version of the iconoclastic wars reaching back at least to the 8th century, Bruegel sketched and painted, an artist of his time but gifted and imaginative. He was a maker of visual images that Protestants found so threatening and idolatrous, and yet in one sense his art might be called Protestant in so far as Protestantism was a religious expression of a time and place that questioned hierarchy and prescribed dogma. For Bruegel the expression of that zeitgeist meant painting ordinary people doing ordinary things. On the other hand he was quite the opposite of a reformer, comfortable with the powers that be, moving from Antwerp to Brussels in part to be in



closer proximity and on more intimate terms with the Catholic Habsburg court who were his patrons, admirers, and collectors. Neither group could see him as an early modern, as someone hinting toward today any more than we can confidently say he was a link in a chain of artistic development that led inevitably to our present. Instead, think of his painting as any other species, branching this way and that, thriving, dying, subject to the weather, war, and the wheels of civilizations.

Bruegel’s seasons, like the people they depict stand on their own in their time and place, not in deference to holy writ, and not as rough sketched outlines of yet to be polished people in a promised afterlife, but as creatures in an earthly story. Tempting to call them modern, yes, but as noted, Bruegel seemed merely to be working the questions, telling stories, and avoiding pat answers. Religious subjects were his stock and trade, the *de rigueur* of his era, but he often placed divine subjects and stories in a subordinate position to other elements of a composition. Notably, in The Conversion of Saul (1567) the broad back-sides of horses in a company of armored soldiers ascending along a steep mountain passage are bold and prominent, their hindquarters the focus of the scene (even a child can see that: “Look, Mom, a horse’s ass”)—the sort of deflating humor our painter would have enjoyed in the middle of an oh-so-serious discourse. Or perhaps the focus is instead the towering spruce in the middle of the scene the trunk of which leads the eye down to a small boy in armor and helmet much too big for him, sheltered under the branches. It takes effort to even find Saul where he lays struck down on the road by the light of his conversion. And keep in mind that the compositional de-emphasis of the main theme (if Saul’s conversion is, in fact, the main theme) is decidedly not unique to Bruegel;

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it was the manner of many painters of his time to eschew the obvious, and force the eye about, rewarding the careful viewer in the belief that a subtle point is made stronger by its subtlety or by placing it in situ. And employing such a manner, Bruegel is parting company with the Italian painters whose versions of Damascus-Road Saul he likely saw in his travels. Critics argue that perhaps it's simply a respectful and humble presentation of a conversion experience (a private experience) away from the public eye, painted as a minor event among the hubbub of life that tends to obscure important events, and so much the better because those seeking to find a confirmation of the importance of personal religious conversation within the crush of everyday distraction, find Saul, and are confirmed that they are among those “who have eyes to see.” Then again, ordinary life might, in fact, be the point of this “religious” painting as it is in Bruegel's seasons. Perhaps Saul's conversion is an ordinary, daily life kind of “conversion” or secular enlightenment-type of experience. In other words, it's the thing that happens when the wonder of things—ordinary things (like a trip through a mountain pass)—strikes, whether or not there is a voice from the sky, a blinding light, and a fall from a horse, or not.

Other Bruegels reveal a more conventional perspective on religious subjects. He places corrupt human nature in counterpoint with the churches that dot his landscapes and villages. The church buildings are present in a documentary way, of course, but with their sharp gables, cross-topped steeples, and gothic buttressed walls, Bruegel often uses them as a kind of visual “stay” against disorder, human foibles, and the excesses and weaknesses of the characters. It's sin, in other words—the church's view of the state of humanity—a fall from perfection in the story of the perfect garden by giving in to temptation, by breaking the rules and consuming forbidden

knowledge. And thus we might argue for a faithful, orthodox Bruegel. Still there’s something that doesn’t “love a wall” in his work, as the poet says, something “that wants it down.” What he believed about the wreckage of the Reformation and bloody Counter-reformation he witnesses tearing apart his homeland—the militant, political, social upheaval that could not be ignored because it pointed its communal finger directly at the individual and demanded that private belief be made into a public avowal: “[A]nd what do you believe Pieter Bruegel? In what do the living, that is to say, the dying, find comfort?” It is impossible to know how he might have answered. Some think of him as chuckling under his breath, mocking the pretense and the dogma, bemused before the canvas, needling authority, poking fun of high and low in equal measure. But I see a dour Flemish frown on his famous self-portrait The Artist and the Connoisseur (1565). There’s humor in the paintings, absolutely—irony, satire, and ridicule—but he’s not laughing. The straight-man makes the joke cut deeper—it’s serious humor for a deadly serious world.

All we really know is what we think we see in the surviving work: not belief, not his heart. Bruegel’s work endures resurgent in the last century, and it is especially worthy of consideration today, and in view of the Ottoman battles against Vienna because the grand city as the Viennese knew it was preserved and held after the siege of 1529 and repeatedly attacked as a barrier between east and west. But what if that winged Polish cavalry had been delayed and the city lost and Turkish power smashed its gates and eastern culture flowed into the west? Would not Bruegel’s influence, and with it the western world with its own conflicts and crazies, religious foment, and renaissance, also spread east? What showing might Bruegel’s paintings have made in Istanbul? Surely Sultan Mehmed IV wouldn’t have destroyed the pictures—graven

as they are. Perhaps his newly empowered Vizier, whose concern was less with Islamic orthodoxy and more with the secular matters of state, would have seen no vital sin in the display of western art. So foreign and strange, so—well—representational; he might have put the seasons on parade as spoils of the corrupt Habsburg court and toured the loot as far as Kars, or Baku. Or think of Bruegel in Baghdad, where the art of the so-called peasant—whose pictures prick the despot’s violent tyranny, the theologians’ textual pretense, and the commoners’ willful ignorance—might have given an early modern nudge to all the sons of Ur.

Hold your horses, western man; the Baghdad of the Golden Age of Islam had more to teach the west than anything Bruegel ever made. Blame the Mongol Horde, if you must, who pulverized the city in 1258 and made the Tigris black with the ink of libraries dissolving and the knowledge, potential influence, and arguably more enlightened version of enlightenment than that which later developed in the west, flowed away, violently, down the stream. Please forgive the trite historical what-if. It is merely an appeal to the next jack-booted hoard who rides across Iraq hell-bent on destruction to save the art. Naïve perhaps, but it’s Lincoln’s “better angels” we can aspire to—despite knowing that the Calvinettes who threw rocks through stained glass, toppled marble saints, and axed the altar-pieces, were as committed to their work as the Taliban who drilled dynamite into the giant stone Buddhas. If the Mongols had had cell phones, they would have taken selfies with swords raised along the black Tigris and made graven images of themselves just as the mullahs did, who posed for still-shots and played to the camera in their stylish Ray-Bans as the Buddha came tumbling down, fell on its knees and kissed their wrinkled hands.

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Fragments of acquisition records the color and texture of almond hulls are buried in the vaults of the Kunsthistorisches; they smell of flax and have all the marks of revelation, hinting that somewhere along the river journey in transit from Brussels to Vienna one (or more) of Bruegel’s seasons was lost. Imagine a silted canal, a boggy backwater remnant of the work of Charlemagne eight hundred years earlier when, rumor has it, he ordered the Rhine connected to the Danube via the Main River, *et al.*—a series of hard-won ditches and earthen dikes linking shallow ponds, which made a watery passage from the North Sea to the Black. Europe connected, if not united.

Lurching to a stop, the hapless barge crew runs aground, and one of the crates of goes off the bow with a splash—a frayed bight on a stevedore knot. They plunge oars, and haul back from the silt-bar churning in fruitless eddies as the crate bobs. Soon bubbles appear along the seams of the crate’s joinery, and before they’ve unstuck the barge, the crate sinks. Night is falling and the cool running waters of the Danube are in view sliding fast toward home, moonlight glinting, beckoning beyond the mouth of this swampy, mosquito-infested channel, and besides, they reason, of what consequence is one lost crate in the history of the fine arts? Electing to keep dry and to keep their secret, they heave-ho on the oars and leave Bruegel’s best behind, or as the poet says, they “sailed calmly on.” Not one of them can read or write, but for good measure they drag the leather purse with its written inventory through the water, hoping the wet ink will run and cover their loss. Watching all the while in the failing light, hidden among the willow banks, a sharp-eyed and enterprising youth tending her cows knows the water is but three feet deep where

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she saw the crate sink, and with a quick punt and her crook, she fish-hooks the crate up by one of its rope handles, and has it out of the water before the second layer of oilcloth wrapping is damp.

Cleated along the back wall, behind curtains in the village tavern, the big painting hangs for decades; strangers are charged for a peek. When its finder can no longer be its keeper, its history falls to sketchy rumors of hooded thieves and secret societies. Perhaps it spends the centuries deep in Bavarian woods under the log-rafters of a minor Duke’s or Elector’s hunting estate, not in a home, and certainly not in their public museums, as the lost painting is rumored to contain Bruegel’s most biting satire, most ribald dances, most vivid brutality, and most pointed criticism of church and state, including a wry self-portrait tucked in the extreme lower left: the artist as warty fish-monger relieving himself from a second story balcony above a busy street where the haughty pass to and fro, smug in their avarice while in the gutter a torpid and pious child-of-acedia splays along with several other figures quoted from his seven deadly sins. The subject looks to camera, careless with his aim, oblivious to a neighbor who squats above him out a third story window, pants at his knees.

A dozen generations of hunters and seven dozen generations of their dogs mill beneath the Bruegel, centuries of mornings filled with wanderlust and taut collars and afternoons in sated slumber and slack jowls that nearly mirror the scenes painted above them—the picture like prophecy and diary of the exploits of the lodge: tables laid with feathered game, hunters in worked leather and dew-wet wool, black powder horns at their sides, snap-clever traps in their hands, mud-caked galoshes dripping above a gutter, and their firearms, oiled and clean, handed down to their offspring, some of whom were conceived beneath the picture in attitudes prone and

bent-backed; all wax and wane. Few see the inscription scrawled on the panel’s reverse in charcoal, likely by the artist, a headstone epithet common in his time; did he know he had three years to live? “Gaze on us perhaps with glee, as you are so once were we...” Thus, the dead speak to the living—to the living who listen, who read, and who see. Every winter three cords of beech firewood goes up the stone chimney and as layers of soot accumulate on the panel and on the walls around it, bold colors darken, the vivid brightness dims until the picture blends with the wall and so camouflaged, disappears.

Like a man without a mirror for forty years one day walks an unfamiliar path and finds still water and leaning sees a hideous face and drops in shock to his knees; disbelieving his own eyes, he staggers and stumbles and drowns. Like that. “What’s that smell?” ask the hunters, who should know better, the storm having gathered not far from this very lodge, looming ghastly like an anvil-headed thunderstorm on the plains, impossibly high, impossibly fast, lightening breaks with the sound of cracking enamel, of ten thousand SS rifle-butts on the teeth of Europe. The painting must be moved to safety as the malignant foaming wickedness drives east out of Bavaria under the name The Pure Nation’s Party, Operation Barbarossa. Along with dozens of old masters from neighbors’ collections, a small abandoned salt mine known only to locals is converted to a treasure trove. There’s no time for cleaning, no time for provenance, the Bruegel is wrapped in moth-dust quilts and secured underground.

Bobbin-wheeled tanks of the Wehrmacht roll east clattering on implacable chains; acrid diesel exhaust attends them. The gut clenches and the breeze holds its breath as eight times 88 Tigers appear on the ridge-line, sweeping into formation with clots of ragged turf and soil

pouring from their rear sprockets. They blast their needle guns across the grassy folds of the steppe as Stukas dive screaming and rise, and dive and rise, and together with the tanks they stitch an old German seam joining vast bolts of grave cloth unrolling over Slavic lands. Panzer man and Waffen man imagine chaste eyelet cloth, whose tiny circles are patterned as white mountain flowers; in demented reverie they sew a delicate chemise and drape it pleat by plunging pleat over the ribbed skin of virgin Lebensraum—their deviant sexual nationalism winking wicked death to softest purity. Some of the conquered raise their hands in welcome, hailing them as liberators from the time of starvation. Despite the order of the Paranoid Secretary of The Soviet Working People’s Cleansed Party, the people of the earth had survived, endured long enough to face the next desperate fiend’s attempt to obliterate them. Those whose lives mark the world with their ordinariness, their sacrifice or decency or passion or strength—they are the targets of the puny-souled miscreants who in the night in their beds dream of gutting. Especially so, the stars of Abraham plunge, their sands all run out, and their spirits dissolve in shallow graves at the roots of Polish conifers or settle into beds of feather grass all gone to golden under bright Ukrainian sun and cold blue sky.

Who can feel the suffering of the past or number those who mourn?

When Allied bombs collapse the entrance to the mine, the massive support pillars of the deeper vaults carved from the living salt crack, but hold. Red Army brigades appear suddenly as if spilling from a giant beast broken open on the landscape; they stream into fields and back gardens, appear at front doors like ghoulish doppelgängers of veterans returning home, they stare but do not see, they grin but do not smile, blood crusts in their ears, and they do not knock.

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Swarming the rubble, propelled by commands of their brutal thug in the name of the Siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Stalingrad, they take pillaging revenge on every German man, woman, and child. Trains freshly relieved of grisly loads are commandeered and draped with red banners. The waving hammers and sickles promise industry and freedom from want. Decadent art has little to offer their work-a-day world, but they shove it into boxcars nonetheless, if not for desire, then as the price of punishment. At gunpoint the town’s bedraggled remnants do the hauling. The cracked corners of the heavy frames slide along the floorboards, scrape into the creosote and dried residue from the tormented human cargo. After the last load is stacked and the heavy doors secured, they’re shot next to the tracks, one spent casing tumbling end for end and landing in the dirt next to each corpse, and the bullets lodge, with bits of flesh and hair, in the sides of the boxcars like braille tattoos, messy twins to the neat chalked numbers lately accounting the human loads. Tracks converge from across the Soviet sector with more trophies than the fat ace of the Reich ever squirreled away under his cheeks. All are bound for nostalgia town, not for Linz, but for a fortress near Gori, high in the Caucasus. Meantime near Moscow, the delusional splays on a couch, notorious, he slicks his hair and puts down his pipe long enough to show his gunpowder smile and scrawl his initials on an order to execute another thousand, or ten thousand, or hundred thousand? Nay, they sing of his slain millions, and no rumor that. He aches to hear news of his loot, for when he has made the gold—the German-cum-Anatolian-cum-Trojan-cum-Hittite gold—secure in the ark beneath the out-stretched wings of the cherubim (he has it, he’s always had it), the alchemy of ancient myth and modern weapons

will yield up for his lust the power to consolidate continents, a power the likes of which the burning skeleton in Berlin scarce imagined.

Hidden by a cloud of steam, the curved brake-shoes disengage and sand pipes dribble grit on the rails, and a force as elemental and unbending as an iron line on an iron circle drives the old masters with a chug and a clank to face their oblivion on the vast icy steppe beneath the coldest train wheels. A bit of ratty canvas hangs across the Bruegel where it stands aslant at the far end of the boxcar. Flat on the floor, a wide-eyed Raphael sliced across the middle bleeds. The Goyas are mirrors, and the Renoirs are so, so embarrassed by the intimacy of brutal boots and mud and blood. How subtle Titian! How precise Durer! Call it all what it's come to: kindling. The broken but ambulatory soldiers use their bent Moisin rifles as canes. Freezing, they pull whatever is handy from their cache at each stop with hands missing fingers wrapped in bloody rags. They bust up the masters with a shovel, or prop the frames and crack them into billets with a boot stomp, and soon there's a fire to heat their tins of beets and Lend-Lease SPAM (Meat for the Senate and Populous) for their suppers. The canvas lights so easily, the dry wood and varnish burns hot; later they kick the ashes in the dirt and fart under their blankets. An art-house movie of this poignant historical scene would show the soldiers in live-action, intercut with still photographs of the shocked and alarmed faces of the figures in the paintings, especially the faces in the Goyas and Bruegels. A better film would dissolve all the faces, the living and the dead—including that of the Bolshevik high-priest glued to his set—to a double-feature cowboy western, imagining a stallion under his scrawny thighs and himself with that John Wayne drawl, the ennuie of the big white man who didn't ask for his burden, but by god, is not going to shirk his duty.

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And let's have a reflection of the filmmaker in the lens as well, and all the images melting, the pigment, the celluloid, the fluids, all together pooling and hardening in the cold.

The Bruegel escapes the campfires. An officer who took charge at the Russian border was extraordinarily young, but he was educated and knew what he had. He ordered the inventory straightened and covered, securing the Bruegel near the door. Its scene fixed him in the heart with a look like that of a mattery-eyed drunk in an alley screaming spittle and poetry. When a boiler valve cracked, they halted west of Moscow where dense choirs of spruces sway, and only he knew that his family dacha stood but a kilometer away. He secured the Bruegel to a pair of skis, and in the dark he set out on snow-shoes and was back in command before the second watch. Think of night winds and howling fear and snow sounds and owls and the love of a secret prize. After repairs, as the train moved out, he stepped from the trailing car and deserted to the trees. He propped the panel against the widest wall of the little house where it partially covered two windows and lived out the remaining months of the war staring at the myriad figures by candlelight, sleeping beside them, talking to them. And they talked back. Living on hunted meat and a cache of vodka, he died of smoke inhalation while sleeping off a binge when a half-burned log rolled onto the hearth stones and smoldered for hours. In the years after the war, squatters broke in, some for shelter, others to wreak havoc. Doltish teens smashed windows and urinated on the panel, but the ammonia in their piss dissolved layers of grime, and by the time new owners took possession (they assumed the painting belonged to the place) the colors had brightened back. The son of a neighbor would grow up to become a filmmaker and remember his childhood summers redolent of spruce and naked skin and the girl who lived next door where a

giant painting nearly filled one wall—where the fantastical, enchanting, and terrifying figures were so numerous they could not be counted on all their fingers and bare toes. In the woods by day and near fireplace by night, they told stories of the figures they saw, animating their lives, imagining them as friends and as fiends. Grown, every film he made recalled the Bruegel. He deep-staged every shot, struck beauty against violence, added prescient crows to the trees. Everyone remembers the portrait of his mother in a pale pink crocheted dress, and the golden horses on a golden beach eating golden apples.

So the story goes. There are many others, many better tales told.

Back in Flanders hundreds of seasons of months pass, the religious wars of the 16th century and Bruegel’s The Triumph of Death forecast the destruction of world-shattering armies that twice sow crops of soldiers’ bones in the green fields of home. Another half-century on and the soldiers lie peaceful still in manicured honor where staid sculpture keeps watch. Meantime the towns and cities of the lowlands thrive, their prosperity swinging on herds of cycling tourists, secure in capital markets and secular transactions and so religiously tolerant (all kinds of tolerant) that the old wars seem impossible, when Protestants and Catholics tore each other limb from limb and cheered the pieces. Worrisome is the tautology built into tolerance. What’s looming, the latest storm on the horizon, is a familiar weather pattern: Call him Ishmael, Jesus’ son, or the wanderer; he is suffering, homeless, and raging, as blind as he is illiterate, and while there’s nothing remarkable about someone claiming to speak for god or to be acting on his behalf, the worry is in the up-take, in the low-pressure trough that draws the lowest common

denominator and raises it to the power of hate. On the high horse of irony the tolerant ride, judgmental, complacent.

Art is not enough, but imagine the lost Bruegel finding its way back to Flanders, appearing in the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Antwerp in 2019 after the remodeling is complete, so the world might consider the world figured there.

### **Note on Bruegel Resources**

My account of Bruegel’s lost season, while imaginary, is nevertheless loosely tethered to an historical record of his life and work established by scholars acknowledged below. Riffs on others’ work were inspired, like them, by Pieter the Elder himself as far back as his sons. An admixture of fiction with history seemed appropriate for a consideration of Bruegel as I wanted to play in the realm of subjective wealth we find there—enough, I think, to hold our interest for another 450 years. Also, those familiar with cattle will note the poetic license I’ve taken with the breeds in Bruegel’s herd and with the anatomy of the Frisian-Holstein. A cow better fit my purposes—thus, the imaginary udder.

Max J. Friedländer’s canonization of early Netherlandish painters in 14 volumes, 1924-37.

Walter S. Gibson’s seminal, Bruegel, 1977.

R. H. Marijnissen and M. Seidel’s comprehensive catalog, Bruegel, 1984.

Iain Buchanan’s research in The Burlington Magazine, August 1990.

K. Akinsha and G. Kozlov’s exposé, Beautiful Loot, 1995.

Michael Frayn’s intelligently funny novel, headlong, 1999.

Michael Francis Gibson’s thoughtful commentary, The Mill and the Cross, 2001.

Philippe and Françoise Roberts-Jones’s six lbs. of outstanding reproductions, Pieter Bruegel, 2002.

Manfred Sellink’s benchmark analysis, Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings and Prints, 2007.

Larry Silver’s illuminating survey of the forbears, peers, and scions of Pieter Bruegel, 2009.

Lech Majewski’s technically luminous film adaptation of M.F. Gibson’s, The Mill and the Cross, 2011.

Jem Cohen’s contemplative film, Museum Hours, 2012.

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