

The snow and I, a failed relationship

by Sabine Eiche

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After the briefest of honeymoons, I was ready to fight for divorce. The case: Snow vs Eiche.

While I was fuming and fretting about the effects that this mésalliance was having on me, a vocabulary of pertinent words drifted through my mind. First of all, the guilty party – snow. Although the ancient Romans had a word for snow in Latin – “nix, nivis” – the only trace it left in English is the adjective niveous, snowy, recorded in 1623. Instead, snow, like so many one-syllable English words, comes from a dialect originally spoken by one of the Germanic tribes. It’s based on the Old English “snaw,” which, like the modern German “Schnee,” can be traced to the Proto-Germanic “snaiwaz.”

The first twenty-four-hours of the honeymoon were enchanting, with snow a pristine and candid blanket over everything. Pristine is one of those words that took a little fork in the road. Its source is the Latin “pristinus,” the adjective for early, original, former. When it was introduced into English, in the 1530s, pristine signified primitive or ancient, but by the early 20th century it meant unspoiled, untouched, pure.

In describing snow as candid, I’m not saying that it was frank or informal, which are the main senses of the word now, but rather that it was white. Candid comes from the Latin “candidus,” white. The modern Italian word “candido” adheres to the Latin meaning, but is also used figuratively to mean innocent or pure.

Every now and then during the past white weeks we saw the daytime temperature rise a little, only to plummet again overnight. This left the snow sheathed with frost that crackled and crunched when we walked on it. Frost, from the Proto-Germanic “frustaz,” is sometimes further described as hoar or rime. The Old English “hrim” is the source of rime and refers to a frozen mist or fog. Rime can also be a synonym for hoarfrost, which more specifically is frozen dew. Hoar, deriving from the Old English “har,” means grey-haired with age, venerable (it comes from the same Proto-Germanic source, “haira,” as the modern German “Herr,” a title of respect). A resemblance of the ice crystals of frost to an old man’s white beard led to the coining of the term hoarfrost.

My infatuation with snow petered out completely when its ugly side began to dominate the scene. Vehicles ploughed through the snow and left it a sullied mess, a flood of slush on the roads, freezing overnight to become thick ice. Driving, even walking, was an act of daring.

Slush, a word first documented in the 17th century, is thought to be imitative of sloshing, the sound of splashing. The verb sully, in use since the late 16th century, derives from the Middle French “souiller,” to soil. Used figuratively, it’s linked to the Old French “soillier,” to make dirty. The Old French, in turn, has been related to “souil” (wild boar’s wallow or pigsty), which can be traced to the Latin word for little pig, “sucus.”

Happily divorced from snow, my garden and I are looking forward to the courtship of spring, a gentler partner.