

By The Grace Of Snow

Jackson Hole

Winter 2000-2001

by Ted Kerasote

Global warming . . . impoverished winters: these are the times that try my soul, especially right now as the midwinter weeks wind down toward the spring equinox, and the sun, edging up in the sky, softens the south-facing snowpack, making the newly fallen powder dense and less than carefree. It's when my reverse Seasonal Affective Disorder kicks in, my depressing mental toboggan slide starting at the end of January when the light increases, and I start counting the days before I have to go back on Prozac to keep the spring blues away: warmth, chirping birds, budding trees, flowers, green grass – the full catastrophe.

Yet, even in these sad interglacial times, my hopes can be rekindled by one good storm. Of course, I'm not talking about your classic blizzard, dropping feet of snow with high winds, which are hardly the ingredients of remarkable backcountry powder skiing. Rather what I want are those steady orographic pulses curling nightly over the Tetons and leaving four, six, nine, eleven inches of light-density snow, so that two to three feet of fluff await, buoyant as a soufflé, unmarred as first love, alluring as terra incognita on a blank and ancient map.

Thankfully, one of these storms is taking place right now, and Merle, my Golden Lab, and I leave the house early and sit at the base of Teton Pass while plow drivers and deputy sheriffs clear the road of southern Californians,

Floridians and Texans, with their insufficient, all-season radial tires, their clogs, Birkenstocks and cowboy boots, their lack of shovels and gloves, and their misplaced faith in the sanding truck. The only redeeming part of our wait is that many potential backcountry skiers grow impatient and turn around for the ski area. When the road suddenly opens, but a handful of the faithful remain.

Most of them, carrying snowboards and downhill skis, walk up Mount Glory as Merle and I head south from the parking lot atop the pass. When I take off my climbing skins a few minutes later above the run known as Powder Reserve, two snowshoers pass us, going toward Black Canyon. Within 200 yards, they're gobbled by the falling snow and low clouds, leaving Merle and me alone.

Lying on his belly, he sticks his muzzle and entire head in the snow, snuffing and inhaling deeply like a wine connoisseur, before rolling over and over in the powder, jumping to his feet and giving himself a wriggly shake of sheer delight. He wags his tail so hard, it slaps his ribs, and he laughs a panting grin – real snow again! Merle's methodology may not be very scientific, but he knows what he's looking for: snow that seems more air than substance.

Poking with my ski pole at the newly fallen half foot, lying atop another half

foot, I can only agree – good skiing definitely lies ahead. Actually, the quality of what we're appreciating – light density snow, cold smoke, champagne powder, it's known by many names – can be described with numerical precision. Each day from November through April, the Bridger-Teton National Forest Avalanche Hazard and Mountain Weather Forecast does exactly that, posting the amount of new snowfall over the last 24 hours and its equivalent water content (both expressed in inches) on its recorded telephone message and website.

“Equivalent water content” is the amount of water you would find if you melted a sample of the new snowfall and measured the result in a standard rain gauge. If you then divide the inches of this equivalent water content by the inches of snowfall, you will get a percentage that describes the density of the newly fallen snow. For example, ten inches of new snow, with an equivalent water content of .5 inches, equals a snow density of five percent.

As a rule of thumb, light density snow falls at low temperatures, denser snow at higher temperatures, closer to freezing. This is intuitive, and why warming trends are so devastating to the physical and mental well being of powder skiers. What isn't so immediately apparent is that negligible differences in density translate into large differences in the enjoyment we perceive swooping downhill.

Ten percent snow is very skiable – effortless, carvable, quick. In fact, some of the most memorable powder days I can remember have been in nine percent snow. But increase the snow density only slightly, to 12 or 15 percent, and you get those gloppy porridges that clog the mountains of New England and the Sierras and force skiers to point their skis straight downhill even on steep terrain so as to generate enough speed to move. Anything less than seven percent snow

is the elixir called light powder. Snow that is less than five percent in density is an amazingly ethereal substance, mostly not there.

Today, the snow's density is five percent, which means that in any given volume of it, say, the sinuous track that Merle and I are about to leave on Powder Reserve, 95 percent of what we're going through is nothing but air. This is why powder skiing is the closest human beings and dogs can get to flying while still being attached to the earth. It's also the reason why summer in the mountains is literally such a drag. You have to plod downhill instead of float.

The first turn doesn't disappoint us. The snow, like vaporous spindrift, rises around my waist, cascades over my shoulder and hits me in the face. During the next several turns there is no bottom, just the platform that my sinking weight creates under my skis and off which I turn. Merle surfs behind me. Emerging from the trees, we hit a rude crust, left over from the last few sunny days, and I decide on the route we must take during the rest of our tour. It will be mostly in forest.

At the creek bottom, I put my climbing skins back on and head up Edelweiss, the 1200 foot-high ridge that separates Trail Creek and the East Fork of Mail Cabin Creek. The skin track is filled in; at the top there is nothing to be seen but cloud and falling snow; we drop off the back side, finding, just as on Powder Reserve, deep fluffy snow at the top, in the trees, and crust half way down on the open slopes. No point in continuing on these exposures.

We angle north, onto a secluded and heavily treed ridge called the White Goddess, a name invented long ago by me and a ski partner, and used by no one else whom I know. It's one of winter's many charms, snow creating not only a physically altered topography, potential new routes

everywhere, but also a mental one, each traveler having the opportunity to be an explorer in a landscape that becomes his or her own mythological geography.

No sun has touched the Goddess; the snow lies deep; she is her usual fulsome self. Even though the conifers grow thick on the ridge, there is nonetheless a narrow twisting glade on her spine, invisible from afar and dropping 800 feet to the valley floor, with a steep and luscious finish, a wave of descending snow matching me turn for turn down the slope. Like some sea mammal, only his head visible, Merle swims down behind me and emerges, a dog again, from the cascading snow. Ecstatic, he dances his front paws up and down in a jig.

The wind has come from the west, and the huge open bowl, rising before us and facing east, is clearly loaded with snow. It's what we've been heading for; it's the *crème de la crème*; but it's a route that I don't care to ski alone, for it has a convexity at its top, where the snow is stretched and under tension, and below it there is a gully. A perfect little avalanche trap, and I'm not sure that Merle, who is the most patient of souls, wouldn't simply sit there if I were caught in a slide and wait for my emergence instead of digging me out.

Foregoing a traverse of the bowl, we climb up through the trees, tour along the top of the ridge in perfect safety, and at its far end, I take off my skins next to another thick stand of conifers that descends steeply back to the valley floor at the very edge of the catchment basin. It's not the hero's line, but it's a sweet line, and a secure one, and getting to it has made me feel like an ancient mariner, skirting the coasts, tacking uphill through forests to find reliable trade winds and safe passages through the reefs.

I clear the snow from my boots, tighten the buckles, see that my bindings are in release mode, and cinch my pack.

Equipment check list done, I look again at the slope dropping below us, calculating where I will turn out if something releases – not that the slope will slide, or else I wouldn't be skiing it. Still, one doesn't take anything for granted. It would be a long time to hold one's breath.

"Ready?" I say to Merle.

He looks at me seriously, one eye staring down the slope, reappraising the line, one hanging on me.

"Let's go!"

I turn downhill and he jumps behind me. The snow, locally trapped by the embayment of trees, is shockingly deep, up to my hips. Like a cloudburst on a windshield, it erases the world in front of my goggles. Then I rise into the turn – trees, pelting snow, the slope unrolling below. And another cloudburst of white. There is no bottom to the snowpack, only the sense of soaring through a delicate and supportive space – amniotic and with the dreamlike experience of my own body being a wing.

This is precisely the sensation that has now disappeared from almost every ski area in the world, high speed lifts carrying so many people uphill each hour that nowhere does snow accumulate untracked for days, becoming "bottomless." One is always skiing on yesterday's traffic, which is all the more reason for these journeys to the backcountry.

The temperature has fallen; the snow has become, if possible, lighter than it was this morning; and I am almost entirely in it, wrapped in home. The skiing – or the flying – is so good that Merle and I return to our skin track, reascend it, and do the run again.

Then, as the afternoon darkens, we make our third climb of the ridge and find a line that we've never really

named, leaning instinctually toward the belief of old cultures that you never utter the name of what is most powerful and sacred. From the ridgecrest it's hard to discern that there is even negotiable terrain in the subalpine fir below us – one of the reasons this line is so rarely skied.

But the line is there, opening suddenly into a narrow slope a little over 40 degrees in steepness, facing northwest, shaded, hidden, and with a sudden left and right turn, then a one-skier-wide plumb line to the valley floor. It is often filled with boulders and fallen trees, but now they are all erased by the winter's snow, as if the world were newly made and had not yet seen its first erosion.

As eagles, as children, as pups, Merle and I drop off our perch and float down through the clouds.