



# T H I S I S S K I I N G

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# THIS IS SKIING

THE IMPOSSIBLE ROMANCE OF SLIDING OVER SNOW

LITO TEJADA-FLORES & LINDE WAIDHOFER



*Piz Corvatsch, Engadine, Swiss Alps*

THIS IS SKIING



*Southern Alps, New Zealand*

*fresh powder,  
Mt. Alyeska  
Alaska*



# THIS IS SKIING

THE IMPOSSIBLE ROMANCE OF SLIDING OVER SNOW



*fresh powder, Colorado Rockies*

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*First tracks, Telluride, Colorado*



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## WINTER

Winter rides out of the West on a white horse of storm and cloud and snow, reins in over the Elk mountains of central Colorado and camps. Home again. The color white, which is both colorless and all colors, begins to color our life. Reality follows the bears into hibernation and the Rocky Mountains wake up to a colder, cleaner, crisper vision of themselves.

Snow settles out of the sky like a blessing, always on time, always unexpected, a cold blessing we're not sure we deserve, and can't live without.

Winter winds the world's clock to start the year anew. The earth's wounds covered and healed by a salve of snow, the clutter of cars and commerce slowed and simplified by barriers of snow....

The noise of this all-too-noisy twenty-first century hushed by a blanket of snow, tomorrow's errands postponed, tomorrow's schedule rewritten by an overnight dump of snow. If winter is rebirth—and it is—then each winter works like a bonus in our lives: a new start, a second, a third, a fourth chance to get it right, to match the purity of our intentions, of our actions, to the purity of new snow. A mountain without tracks. A new canvas waiting for the new lines that will define a new day, a new skier, a new you, a new me.

Skiers have always known this. Skiers have always played a winter game of snow and space and grace: sliding and gliding, cold air, adrenalin, gravity.

The world has changed but winter is a constant. Fashion has changed but winter is beyond fashion. Skis and skiing, lifts and lodges have all changed, but winter is neither skis nor skiing, lifts nor lodges. Winter is still simple and sudden and surprising. Winter mountains just as silent. New snow just as sensual.

Winter in the mountains, white on white, year on year, peak on peak. Winter is a white answer to questions that have no answers.





*Morteratsch glacier Engadine,  
Swiss Alps*

## THIS IS SKIING

The dance of fear and desire, the duel of friction and gravity, the deadlock of speed and security. This is skiing. Your fingers so cold you can hardly grip your poles, your eyelashes stuck together. Your skis carving a graffiti message of perfect arcs into winter's white indifference, winter's pale skin, the language of linked arcs, circle talk, S-curve whispers in the wind, spindrift flying off cornices, frost feathers in the snow shooting back darts of light, that first light in the first moments of the first run in the first morning of the world, diamond sparkles, angel dust in the air, diamond daggers that scratch the softer stuff of your skier's heart, runs that never stop. *This is skiing.*



*Rocky  
Mountain  
fluff*

This is what you paid too much money for, and why. This is why you put up with the bullshit at work, the endless snarls on the highway, macho weekend warriors in four-wheel drive Blazers with fat commando tires spinning out across two lanes, bringing the whole parade to a stop, the lost bags and lost sleep, this is why. This is it. Skiing. What you do instead of growing up. What you want to do when you finally grow up and can finally do anything you want to do. The blind boogie of the bumps, a whole universe narrowed down to one twisting gully and three monster moguls, ski tips slippery as snakes, pole plants like prayers, bobbing in and out of a hyperspace of hollows and drops, loose as a goose with burning thighs and a demented grin, finding the line where logically there is none, listening to the rhythm of big bumps, syncopated time warp, while the beat goes on, and on, and on. *This is skiing.*

From the sublime to the sublime. Sidestepping half an hour uphill for a few more vertical feet of the steep and the deep, deep breathing before floating over the edge, falling in slo-mo through cornice, air, time, into slow, yielding, bottomless pillows of powder, floating down into an opaque undersea dance, floating to the surface again, born-again, breathe again, living life one breath and five turns at a time, gravity turned off at the main switch, angels with halos of powder, swinging low, coming for to carry you home. Long sighs of compressed snow, tracks filling up behind you, a hundred yards of perfection, another hundred yards, somewhere down there—your instructions read—there'll be a lift and a passport back to earth waiting for you. You don't want to know about it. *This is skiing.*



*Backcountry  
powder, San  
Juan mountains,  
Colorado*

This is where time stops and tempo builds, this is where suborbital speed calls for a subconscious guidance system, where carved turns become an art and cruising a way of life. Your jaw muscles hurt from smiling, your skis hit high-C as they slice this frozen topo map into hyperbolic sections, your peripheral vision is as good as early-warning radar, you weigh only 20 pounds net and skim across the mountain like a flat round stone across a cosmic pond. *This is skiing.*

You take the biggest eggbeater of your life and somehow survive. Snow is packed down your neck. You've lost your goggles. Your back aches. No complaints, no refunds, no whimpering, this is skiing. You drop down new runs, into new valleys, over new mountains, when does it end? It doesn't, this is skiing. You fall in love, everything works out, you can't believe it, but this is skiing, why not? You've never believed it. It's always been too good to be true. *This is skiing.*

Technique, good, bad or indifferent, is not skiing. New technology and new equipment are certainly not skiing. The wind in your face may be skiing. The fire in your legs is probably skiing. The crazy feeling in your heart as you approach terminal velocity around a white planet where human beings don't belong is definitely skiing. Real skiing. Real skiing is not that all-fired real, it's the dream you don't want to wake up from, ever, though you always do. Weightless, wild, irresponsible, irrational, the white escape hatch from the twentieth century. *This is skiing.*

## RELATIVE VELOCITY

Who among us doesn't know  
the difference  
between skiing fast  
& slow?

At slow speeds we ski through space—  
at high speeds through time—  
but what of the mountain,  
& what of the mountain?

We ski slowly fighting gravity—  
ski fast fighting fear—  
soon we must stop this fighting  
& start skiing.

& who among us really know  
how fast  
or slow  
they go?





*World Cup racing, Vail, Colorado*



## M O G U L S

Big bumps, big bumps,  
obstacles or friends?  
means or ends?  
The trapped skier jumps,  
lands, falls, swears—  
hears the moguls still calling  
him, like a child, falling  
down endless white stairs—  
Big bumps, big turns,  
pole trembles, thigh burns.  
To ski in silence,  
to turn without violence,  
threading our way through rows  
of white questions, endless snows.



*Midwinter moguls, Telluride, Colorado*

## THE WAY IT IS

### *Twelve Reflections on the Romance of Skiing*



1.

It begins in the sky, falls to earth. Sometimes it really falls, blind and straight, heavy flakes laminating into heavier drifts, the dead white weight of the dead of winter – and sometimes it dances, dances downward out of clouds that have swallowed the whole of the winter sky, dances a hundred detours, white-on-white quilting in mid-air, arabesques in the arms of the wind: snowflakes out for a stroll, giddy with gravity, unwilling to settle down, blowing lose and low and forever out of control across the winter landscape, a swirling anarchy of windborn flakes.

2.

It begins in the air, the cold and crystal air condensing into frozen crystals, air that you can taste suddenly becoming air you can touch, orphaned flakes clinging to eyelashes, piling up on pine needles, rooftops, ski runs, secret hollows and stand-alone summits, these out-of-focus dotted lines of snow, millions of them, tying sky to earth, earth to sky. Snow falling to earth like a blessing or a curse, raw material of a new world, a white planet, a skier's planet. Snow doesn't just accompany winter, it is winter. Snow is the matrix in which the magic lodges and grows. It begins in the sky. It begins with snow.

*continued >>*

3.

It often begins at night: a whisper of invisible flakes among pines, falling muffled through dark forest shadow. It begins in the middle of a midnight dream of winter finally arriving on time, just this once. It starts to snow and no one is watching. Hour after hour, invisible accumulations pile up, falling on tiptoe through the sleeping forest; disembodied drifts slowly reassembling themselves while the world sleeps. Winter's deaf and dumb construction crew laboring toward dawn.

4.

It expands with the light – winter light, snow light, summit light. First rays fire up glowing embers along pale ridges, light up ranks of receding peaks high overhead already deep into winter, long gone into the country of silence and frost, cornice and drift. An alpenglow in reverse, salmon pink sunrise slopes fading to white, to pure white, to purer white. White mountains mirroring white clouds. Mountain light magnified by snow turns into a force that pushes against you like wind, tugs at you like gravity, tricks you and burns you and enchants you with its rainbow spectrum of special effects.



*Waiting for another day of skiing, St. Moritz, Switzerland*

*continued >>*

5.

It's about snowy peaks on fire against a painted backdrop of charcoal gray storm clouds. It's about the diamond sparkles of early-morning surface hoar; frost-feather jewels scattered among aspens, waiting for snow miners with skis on their feet. About the lacy scallops of cornice shadow slanting deep blue across white bowls above timberline. About the raking sidelight that exposes every wind-etched contour in the whipped-cream sastrugi formations left behind by careless storms. Light that seems to pour out of, as well as onto, winter mountains. White mountains, lit for a play with no script, a wild, pure improvisation on the high register of non-stop motion, the low register of primal beauty. It's about light, about winter, about skiing.

6.

It's a conspiracy of silence between you and the mountain, a plot you wouldn't find realistic in a third-rate thriller where your skis play the role of double agents, serving two masters, you and gravity. It's an unmasked-for bonus in a sweepstakes you never really entered. A free pass, a ticket to ride, a waver that says you no longer have to obey the speed limits you were born to, the limits of movement, of size, of strength, the limits of your species and your genes.

7.

It thrives on movement, and still more movement, endless nearly effortless movement, skiers flowing downhill like water, skiers pretending to be dancers and suddenly realizing they are dancers. Movement

*continued >>*



*The view from a gondola car toward the summit of Bellecôte, the highest point in La Plagne, France*

in the third person, skier as actor and observer, feeling yourself ski, watching yourself ski, applauding a great turn, catching your breath at sudden acceleration, waltzing into a double helix of interlocked curves; weaving three-dimensional patterns through four-dimensional time: right, left, up, down, right, left. Syncopating the rhythm: right, right, left, pause, rightleft, rightleft. Jazzing the run, romancing the snow. Listening to the different rhythms of each slope, giving in to them one by one, finally moving with the mountain. But always moving. Dancing the mountain's dance. But always dancing.

8.

It alters the curvature of space and time: the clock slows, almost stops. In deep snow turns last forever (almost), skiers are weightless (almost), the mountain infinite (almost), and life for a suspended instant is perfect (almost). You tell yourself nothing is perfect, but skiing comes close enough. It takes you into a hyperspace of strange geometry: the dreamlike arcs of perfect carved turns, the non-euclidean straight lines between two points, schusses that are straight only in the mind, flowing up and down over myriad bumps, both macro- and microscopic, white discontinuities in a skier's



*On the slopes of Piz  
Corvatsch, Engadine,  
Switzerland*

universe. Tracks through trees, tracks playing hide and seek, tracks in formation for no special reason. It tempts you deeper into the forest, tempts you off bigger cornices, tempts you onto new slopes in search of new emotions. It leads you up and up, further and farther, and then some. Inexplicably you always think that the snow on the top of the topmost lift will be better; it seldom is, but the views, the feeling, the spirit of high places never disappoints.

9.

It surprises you when you least expect it, the strange beauty of this marriage of mountains and skis. You discover new images of an old passion. It catches you daydreaming in the chairlift as the roller coaster slopes roll backwards beneath you, ridgelines sliding in and out of view, dots of color below your skis braiding together in slow-motion choreography, then resolving into skiers shredding the last powder at Mach 1. The muscle fibers in your own legs subtly twitching to join them. From across the valley distant slopes are telegraphing you VIP invitations, the snow is always whiter.... It's crazy, but in the middle of a day of skiing you take time out to day-dream about skiing.



*Skiing the Cook Glacier  
on New Zealand's South  
Island*

10.

It's made of memories: white memories. Your first run in waist deep-powder, how did waist-deep suddenly get to be over your head? how did you make it all the way down without falling? how did you leave such a beautiful set of tracks when you've never done anything like that before? Your first trip to the Alps, or to Utah, your first race, your first black run. A certain spring afternoon carving velvet corn into impossible abstractions under a benevolent indifferent Sierra sun. A tiny hut in Austria where nick-of-time schnapps helped fight off frostbite. A love affair that started with light powder, survived an interlude of ice, that moved on to frozen corn, that finally got beyond fear and anxiety, that's still going strong.

11.

It ambushes you in tiny towns, nestled like tabletop toys under giant peaks. Walking down snowy streets in search of the perfect apres-ski hideaway, you stumble on the notion that its all a hideaway, a neutral Switzerland of the heart, that skiing has taken you away from the evening news and the GNP, from office politics and global politics, from profit and loss and pressure—and given you instead something like poetry. The perfect hideaway from the twentieth century. Reality has suddenly become just another option. It pulls you around the world like a magnet. It's filled with siren voices saying, singing: ski me next, ski us next, ski us now, and though life is too short, and you know you can't possibly, you try to anyway, to ski them all



*continued >>*

12.

It feels like falling in love. The emotion, the sensual shiver, the nervous excitement, the irrational sense of well being, the suspicion that it's too good to last. Which it is. Which is why great ski runs always end, great days, great ski trips all end. But like true love, skiing is a self renewing passion. The romance of skiing is most intense when it's most literal, when you're skiing with someone you love. I know: I ski better with you, less well alone. Of course the sky is bluer, the snow lighter when we ski together. Naturally I ski a braver line in front of you, more gracefully, lighter on my feet, following just behind you. Wherever we ski there is always room for two tracks. It's something one has to share. It gets better and better. It never ends.





*Corn snow and ice, French Alps*



## NEW SEASON'S RESOLUTIONS

Try—

to become a beginner once again

Begin—

to unlearn techniques one must explain

Learn—

to treat my skis like old friends

Realize—

that turns are only means not ends

Understand—

that for each skier the snow's the same

Accept—

mountain as master, skiing as game



*Glacier skiing on Mt. Cook, New Zealand's South Island*

D I N N E R T A B L E  
C O N V E R S A T I O N

*for Bob & Karen Chamberlain*

The path, initially at least,  
seems clear, the skier at first  
skis dotted lines—turns,  
traverses, schusses—& finally learns  
something called technique, only then  
can he discover snow & begin  
to carve out real runs from this white  
& yielding medium: there isn't any right  
or wrong in such descents  
& for a while skiing makes sense.  
But with enough time, with no  
more fear & a calm mind, the snow  
itself begins to change: more & more  
ice resembles powder. As before  
we return to abstractions & find  
the mountain has its own lines,  
planes, shapes & curves: go back  
to skiing dotted lines—a black  
on white pattern of movement & form,  
pure form—a new world is born.  
But we're still not there, behind  
even this intersection of mountain & mind  
we sense something always simpler, skiing  
not as metaphor but synonym of being.



*Dawn light near Crested Butte, Colorado*

## TEXTBOOK WINTER

1. Textbook winter falls down out of the sky, so soft and subtle and silent that it's been there, all around you, for weeks before you start to notice, before you really notice, before you wake up to a town full of drifts in lieu of streets, before you notice that the icicles on side porches are already three feet long and still growing, before you say, hey, I haven't used my rock skis since Thanksgiving, I haven't seen a rock for weeks and it's not yet Christmas, it's a textbook winter, a real textbook winter, at last, again. . .

*continued >>*



*Rocky Mountain powder, a state of mind, a state of grace*

2. Textbook winter isn't just a state of mind.

It's a state of weather: dependable, deepening dumps of snow, day after white-flaked day, a state of storms which is also a state of grace when you live in a ski town, a seasonal grace which only falls out of the sky onto town once every three, four, five winters, a state of weather, storms and snow that produces, of course, a state of mind—the right state of mind.

3. Textbook winter starts to take hold of the collective imagination of a ski town the way rumors of revolution spread through third-world shanty towns. People meet at the bakery, the post office, whisper like conspirators: Did you go up on the mountain yesterday morning? Yeah, awesome. Snorkel city, I mean like face shots all the way, like... Like nothing else. Like midsummer dreams of skiing that condense directly out of your mind onto the new-white slopes above town. Like a Warren Miller film only this time you and your friends are the stars and it's happening right here, not a thousand miles away, or in the Alps, or only (as you sometimes suspect) in Warren Miller's imagination.

*continued >>*



*Torchlight parade, Telluride, Colorado*

4. Textbook winter arrives with lines of stacked-up storms that come rolling out of the west, cross-hatching the weather maps with little snowflake graphics, while country music stations broadcast their winter storm-watch advisories to disgruntled truckers 18-wheeling across America through ground blizzards on iced-up interstates, while skiers smile their secret smiles.

5. You know you're in the middle of a textbook winter when the town Marshal puts up extra stop signs to protect the kids as they sled non-stop, out-of-control, down the ice-hung hills, down the snow-slabbed streets and out across intersections where slamming on brakes is no longer an option; when cars with locked brakes can only mush sideways until their bumpers kiss and their drivers grin foolish grins and apologize; when snowballs fly out of left field when you least expect them, and tiny attackers scatter down the street with gales of laughter, waves, giggles.

*continued >>*



*Dropping down into  
Telluride, I*

6. You know it's textbook winter, and nothing else, and nothing but, when it snows and snows and snows, for weeks at a time but only at night, when every morning the clouds dissipate and blow off the peaks like long lace scarves and before you've finished breakfast the sky's a fresh-dyed blue. And by the time you get down to the lift fifty hard-core powder freaks are lined up in front of you, waiting for the first chair, but it doesn't matter because everyone gets first tracks anyway in a textbook winter.

7. Textbook winter is snow pure and simple. Enough snow, all the snow you ever wanted and a little extra, snow à go-go, a self-renewing mantle of white that never gets too hard, too scraped, too icy, too thin, or any of the other cancerous ills that snow is prey to. A planet that squeaks underfoot: six-sided crystalline carpets, sparkling dendrite dust healing summer scars, a cold white slipcover of snow, a borrowed white dress shirt of snow, a wide-awake dream of all the snow you ever wanted and never quite got. You've got it now.

*continued >>*



*Dropping down into Telluride, II*

8. Textbook winter starts on time and ends on time, knows when to quit, doesn't spoil a good thing by snowing right on into mud season, weeks after the last lifts have closed. Textbook winter takes a bow and exits stage right, lets spring slide sideways upcanyon, retaking the high country blade by green blade of grass. Just when no one in town has another turn left to give, just when waitresses start to loose their tempers and ski tuners are getting sloppy, just as the town's collective dreams turn towards Mexico and Moab and surf and sunshine, just in time, while everyone's memories are still mind-deep in powder but before winter becomes a dirty word.

9. Textbook winter leaves town just before you do, moments before off-season really starts. It's over; over before you ever manage to put into words how good it really was; over before you can say thanks. You only dimly understand that you'll be talking about this winter for years to come, that you'll never forget it. All you're sure of is that it happened, might even happen again, once or twice in a skier's life, a textbook winter of fine forever flakes falling out of a cloud flagged sky into a ski town's heart.

*continued >>*



*Heliski powder in the Southern Alps, New Zealand*

P O W D E R

The powder flies,  
we too are flying—  
(but what if a man dies  
after a lifetime of lying  
& being lied to,  
& never gets to explain  
himself, & only these few  
snowy images remain?)  
In powder we feel  
giddy, out of breath,  
& politics & death  
seem equally unreal.  
Time stops. Each turn  
is another truth to learn.

N O T H I N G I S F R E E

Nothing is free—the child  
must pay his dues to walk  
as we must too to ski,  
we too bruise body & ego  
(knee & me) pick ourselves up  
(dusting off snow) & return  
to the same mindless repetition—  
humiliating, liberating exercise.  
Again & again we try the same  
simple turn on the same  
featureless snow & eventually learn  
to say yes to our skis instead of no.  
Nothing is free—but the skier  
is as free as anyone, or freer.



*Powder*  
*purity,*  
*pure sky*  
*pure snow*  
*pure delight*

## P O W D E R   Y O G A

We are breaking all the rules.  
There are no positions, no asanas.  
But in all this crazy movement—  
tumbling, falling, flowing  
down the mountain, exploding  
through cornices, jumping  
over sudden bumps & smashing  
the edges of our skis into hard ice—  
there is something inside us  
which moves less & less,  
slows & finally stops.

It happens first in powder:  
you float motionless  
above both skis & skier,  
inside, above & below the snow,

watching yourself make perfect turns,  
not just in snow, through time  
& frosty air: You have let go  
of your skis & at last, they obey.  
Neither gravity nor friction  
nor muscles make them turn,  
but only love—powder yoga.

Motionless motion, timeless time,  
high-speed quiet, high-tension repose:  
the self no longer skis, no up, no down,  
no discipline, no freedom, no contradiction.  
Eventually we surprise ourselves  
doing powder yoga through the bumps,  
in crusty snow or junk,  
on blue ice— & one day  
even after we kick off our skis.



*Above St Moritz, the telepherique to Piz Corvatsch, eastern Switzerland*

# WHITE SNOW BLACK SNOW

White snow, **black snow.**

White snow falls at night.

**Black snow during the day, business hours, 8 to 5.**

White snow heals summer scars, covers chain-sawed tree stumps, eroded hillsides, farmers' fences. Drifts deeper day by day, scrubbing the dusty world, mountain flesh, mountain flanks, back to something like peace.

**Black snow is an invitation to excess. It's also – let's tell the truth – shot through with glimmers of green, the colors of money, dollars, francs, marks, lire, an excess green weight pressing down on winter's white and perfect skin.**

*continued >>*



*Blue sky, fresh snow, pure joy...*

White snow is that skin, the fairy-tale smooth skin of winter, the mirror in which skiers look for their fast-moving reflections, the fresh and magic carpet on which we move in a state of grace, or which moves us—through imaginary curved dimensions—into that same state of grace.

**Black snow doesn't know when to quit, keeps on falling, a blizzard of sharp flakes drumming on the keys of cash-register mountains, inflaming promoters' dreams of more apartments, more boutiques, more T-shirt shops.**

White snow falls at the last minute, just in time to save you from tennis or television, to open up a new sector of 4-dimensional space-time you thought was off limits (but you were wrong). White snow puts skis back on your feet and wings back on your skis.

**Black snow falls on mountain people like heavy drumbeats before a tribal sacrifice: Say goodbye to Sundays lost in the backcountry, goodbye to the snowy silence sweeping its 360° radar around**

*continued >>*



*Powder in the trees, secret lines, Colorado Rockies*

**your high-altitude heart, goodbye to the simplified pure white shapes of winter, goodbye to gnarled branches softened under snow, goodbye to sharp rock ridges smoothed and gentled. Say hello to two jobs and no days off, hello to sharing apartments with 4 other guys, 3 other gals, hello to Sundays trying to do your laundry, go shopping, repair your car and still ski, in zero visibility of course, hello to high rents and low pay. Hello, hello....**

White snow ransoms back winter, even one free hour, one powder morning a month, one perfect turn; cons you into believing that it's all worth it. Which it is, as long as white snow keeps falling, once a week, once every two weeks, which never seem enough, but is, just barely enough, as long as the powder is deep enough, the slope steep enough, the pull of gravity strong enough and true enough—leaning into the wind, dreaming of a planet that's all downhill, covered waist-deep in white snow.

**Black snow is the counterfeit currency that swaps cholesterol for adrenalin, finance for flying, a steady job for a steady passion.**

*continued >>*



*First tracks in Vail's Back Bowls*

White snow is the real thing, luring us back year after year to line up in the cold long before the lifts are open, buying lottery tickets for the right to be the first human to ski this reinvented white planet.

**Black snow is the commercial cloak of winter, wrestling with the magic, promising a deferred happiness, giving way to greed, sabotaging winter.**

White snow is simply snow, H<sub>2</sub>O crystallized into sudden sixfold perfection, falling like a fresh start, a new hand of impartially dealt cards, another winter waiting for tracks, for motion, for love.

**Black snow**, white snow. An old conflict, a new conflict.



*Spring is all about melting, and freezing, remelting and refreezing, icicles tell the story...*



*Defying gravity, then returning to earth, is all part of spring skiing, or skiing, period*

## SPRING SNOW

1. Spring snow. *Neige de printemps. Firnschnee.* Corn. Ice. Or mush. But mostly velvet. White velvet. You could argue that spring snow isn't really snow at all, but a drug, powerful, addictive, psychotropic.
2. If one were crazy enough to really search for the perfect turn, and lucky enough to find it, one would probably find it in spring.
3. In winter we ski through snow, through clouds of snow, maybe, ultimately we "fall" through clouds of snow, "falling" toward the bottom of the run, skiing this powder snow from within, our turns seem more like subtle bends in an invisible stream than discrete actions with beginnings, middles, ends; these winter turns are more like happenings,

*continued >>*



*Delta Bowl, spring skiing mecca above Telluride, Colorado*

accidents that befall us, happy linked accidents of faith and friction.

But on spring snow, on corn snow, each turn is a proposition to prove, a separate action, a separate creation, something you could sign... and do, an act that is its own signature on the blank white canvas of a March mountainside. Canvas? Actually it's more like rice paper, blank white untracked spring snow, alpine rice paper ready for real-time calligraphy, steel edged brushes underfoot.

4. Spring memories, a skier's lifetime of spring memories:

April morning in the Vaudoise Alps:  
Christ! this stuff isn't snow, it's solid ice, shattered pack-ice, gargoyle-ice, frozen waves, frozen turns, frozen slush, a mine-field of icy furrows and ridges, plowed by afternoon funhogs who are sleeping in right now, too smart to come out into the middle of this white no-man's land where I'm trying to

dance my way down with spastic step-stem improvisations. As far as the eye can see: frozen ruts and turns, only two smooth swaths in this whole wasteland, one cat-track wide, a polished path under the T-bar and one slightly drunken swath down from the top of the bowl. I should have known better. Time for a quick schnapps. Time for another. Time to wait it out. By 11:00 this frozen shit will be soft enough to ski.

Easter picnic at Squaw Valley: Humping our skis up Palisade ridge from Headwall to the top of the Sun Bowl. Those first few turns, awkward and liberating, ridiculous on anything but softened corn. Steep enough I don't want to start, steep enough my first turn has to be just right, and is. And all the others are too. The Sun Bowl opening and laying back and each turn smoother than the last and a tad bigger, looser, happier, until I hit the right cosmic radius for this slope, this snow, this Easter, and lock in all the way down, until Squaw is only a memory somewhere behind my back, and the

*continued >>*



*Above Siberia Bowl, Squaw Valley, California's High Sierra*

granite slabs of Five Lakes say whoa: time for lunch and Beaujolais and music and all that jazz.

An unsorted stack of memories from many springs: Giant turns across the reflector oven slopes of Mount Shasta. The backside of Mammoth Mountain where the spiky backdrop of the Minarets makes it hard to focus one's eyes on the slope. Snaking through blue crevasses on the Mer de Glace under a blue May sky. Hiking down into Les Diablerets, skis over our shoulders, through the first white flowers, *les perce neiges* ("pierce the snow") poking up through the last patches of snow. Rocketing out the bottom of pencil-thin couloirs at Cragburne toward the green canopy of native beech below, eyes big as saucers, while our New Zealand mates laughed to think we found this extreme. So many memories because real spring skiing is, almost by definition, memorable.

5. Real Spring skiing is...

...(a) linked short turns on untracked corn? (b) long-radius turns over wild terrain? (c) very steep skiing? (d) not so steep skiing? (e) high-altitude skiing? (f) any skiing after March 1st? (h) impossible on telemark skis? (i) only possible on tele skis? (j) a good excuse for girl watching on the sun deck? (k) a good excuse for boy watching on the sun deck (l) for wimps who can't ski powder? (m) for real tough guys? (n) for everyone (o) better above 10,000 feet? (p) better above 1,500 meters, but only in the Western Alps? (q) any time a skier springs off the snow? (r) a western skiers' specialty (s) skiing between 10:30 AM and 2:00 PM? (t) cornice jumping in spring? (u) something you lean in ski school? (v) something you can't learn in ski school? (w) an illusion? (x) a reality? (y) an option? (z) a must?...

6. Snow is only frozen water, waiting patiently all winter to become water once again.

*continued >>*



*"Far from the madding crowd," dropping down the backside of Les Arcs, France*

In Spring it finally happens. Within the winter snowpack, snow crystals change their shape by the damndest process, sublimation: ice sublimates directly into vapor without passing through a liquid water phase, then sublimates back to ice again; thickening the centers of fairy tale six-sided snowflakes, changing, building new forms and new snow, denser or looser, safer or more scary, all depends.

But in spring, change in the snowpack seems more normal—simple process that produce easily understandable results. Warm days and a high sun equal melting. Melt water percolates downward through the snowpack until evening shadows freeze everything solid again, and water-logged snow crystals turn into lumpy bonded ice grains. And melt again the next day. And freeze again. Day after day after day. “Melt-freeze metamorphism” the snow scientists call it. We just call it spring snow, and around noon we call it corn. Day by day the spring snowpack becomes more cohesive,

uniform, isothermal; no more hidden layers, traps, slabs waiting to trigger tragedies. This stuff is solid. A solid icing of white ice, whose surface melts daily into a softer carpet; and then toward evening, the whole snowpack can turn into a soggy mess, heavy enough to just ooze downslope, sluff and slide away in big messy slow-motion grinders, wet-snow slides. But the saving grace for skiers is this: if it’s good skiing, it’s safe. And it’s more than good skiing: around midday it’s often sublime.

7. Time slows, slows, slows. Doesn’t quite stop. You don’t know why. Your outside ski is, literally, doing its own thing – no, it’s a conspiracy between the ski and the snow, they’re in it together. The ski bending, trembling, slicing one, two centimeters into the grainy white slope; the snow giving, yielding one, two centimeters, then holding firm, the invisible banked track of a sublime carved arc. Grains of snow-ice flying out one by two by three, the

*continued >>*



*Ice towers or "seracs" on the Cook glacier, New Zealand's South Island*

sound of steel and P-Tex scraping against spring snow growing louder, louder, a whispering roar only you can hear, as the turn builds, builds, builds until the skier in the control room—you, of course, recognizing yourself with surprise as a co-conspirator of this bent ski—until the skier in the control room says okay, enough, all right already, and releases the pressure (where did it come from? where did it go?). Skis float upwards, body floats across and down the hill, the silence is deafening. You stretch your other leg out like a dancer, to find more snow, let your ski roll slowly, slowly, onto its new edge, sink into the soft/hard surface, start to bend, start to turn. Another turn. Another life. You can hear the snow moving, compressing, flying again. Louder. Louder. It will take all afternoon, you think to yourself, to reach the bottom of this bowl. Somewhere in the middle of this new arc you remember that you haven't dropped acid since the late sixties; well, you haven't needed to, still don't.

8. Diary of a perfect run in perfect corn snow:

Right....

Left....

Right....

Left....

Right....

Left....

Right....

Left....

Right....

Left....

and so on, time without end, amen....

9.

**Q.** Why is perfect corn perfect?

**A.** It has to do with edging. Perfect corn edges your skis for you. You don't need either strength or subtlety of edging, but you feel as though you have plenty of both. In a sense this technical "high" is an illusion. But so what? This is spring snow's gift to our stressed-out skiers' egos. Edging in corn snow is so easy that it's

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*Spring in the Swiss Alps, the endless, seldom tracked slopes of Verbier*

simply no longer an issue. Spring skiing at its best seems to be about effortlessly balancing the forces generated between skis and snow, rather than creating such forces, much less fighting them, or overpowering them. It's tempting to assume that this remarkable effortless feeling comes from the self-edging nature of corn snow—a couple of soft yielding centimeters over a smooth rock-hard base. But don't forget, by March we've been skiing for months, by April we feel we can ski better than we walk. By late spring, a skier's coordination is as finely tuned as its ever going to get (this year).

10. Spring bumps...spare me! Gnarly tank traps in morning shade, icy obstacle courses fiendishly engineered to vibrate the soles off your boots, the screws out of your bindings, the fillings out of your teeth. And in late afternoon, slush monsters. A rotten spring mogul is soft enough to let you punch a ski tip clean

through, and ornery enough not to explode in a million pieces when you try to follow your buried ski through its dark heart. There's a window of opportunity, an hour, maybe two, depending on the exposure, where you can ski the hell out of late spring bumps and enjoy it, filling the turquoise sky with white shrapnel as you blast the tops off mogul lip, using scraped-off slush piles in the gullies as natural shock absorbers. But hey, keep off your tips, make your move and keep on moving. Only masochists spend spring days in mogul fields.

11. Spring afternoons are made for waltzing with your shadow down long east-facing ridges. Listening to the slight crackling underfoot as the soft surface starts to freeze up again into a delicate ice glaze. Or skiing straight west into a backlit photo fantasy where trees and other skiers are only black silhouettes with fuzzy gold halos. Where the snow itself will eventually turn pure gold, if you can only avoid the 4:00 PM

*continued >>*



*Endless open slopes, spring skiing on New Zealand's South Island*

sweep...and you can. Because spring is a good time to cut loose, to ski not just beyond area boundaries, but so far beyond that you never cross them at all, never think of them, never see a lift or a lift line. Powder readers will probably understand when I say that the best spring skiing is not found at ski areas, not found on packed or tracked slopes. Ideal spring snow is natural undisturbed snow that has slowly, naturally, taken on the character of super pack. Spring skiing is best on big mountains not on modest trails, far from the crowd, even farther from the crowd. The best spring skiing is always worth walking for.

12. One foot above the other, one breath after another, steel crampon points biting into the mountain's frozen skin, white snow turned middle gray (or is it middle blue?) in deep dawn shadow. We wind our way up a twisting avalanche gully toward the sun, just painting the topmost ridges still hours above us. Skis tied

to our packs, exhaling clouds of frosty breath, placing each spiked foot lightly, carefully sticking to a slope so hard that we could never kick steps even with our plastic-toed ski boots. This is the way spring adventures ought to start. Silent shadowy skiers, building their vertical drop step by step by step, walking the 'stair-chair' with cramponed feet. What better way to pass the morning hours needed for spring ice to melt into a perfect skiing surface? Wandering patiently to the top of a new pass, a new peak.

13. It's true, you know, spring skiing is just a state of mind. But still a state of mind that happens most often in spring. Every spring. This spring. Today. That leaves you punch drunk and satisfied and hungry for more, all at once, today...

...today after all the ups and downs and long way rounds of one more delirious day of big-time late-spring high-alpine super-touring. No foot-weary slogging today. We've been

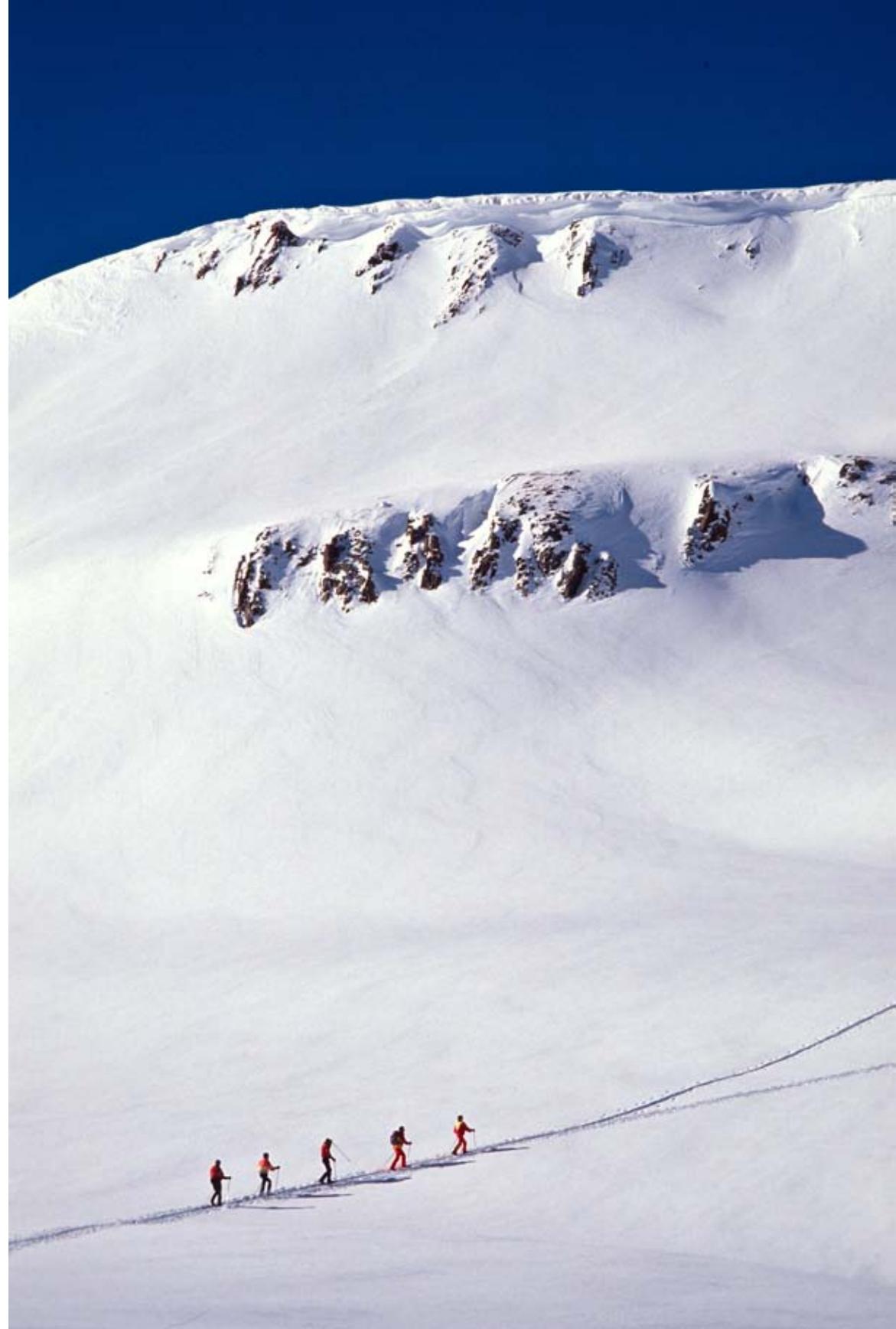
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*Earning our turns, climbing up the "stair chair" in search of untracked slopes'*

*Above, Courchevel, Haute Savoie, France*

*Right, above Red Mountain Pass, San Juan mountains, Colorado*



flying. Or as close as one comes here in the Rockies, to the all-American all-time all-downhill Alpine ski tour (once upon a time, there was a Jet Ranger helicopter and it was all all-downhill, but today was close enough...) And so we stumble out of the canyon on our seven league skis, in one grand and flashy finale, a long sweet schuss down into town and cold Mexican beer and limes, drunk on perfect corn: the slow swoosh and steady hum of skis slicing out of the fall line into that old Kabambo edgeset and...  
...sudden silence as skis and feet and mind lift off in slow-motion suspended time warp, floating forever, and then some, into the next turn, and the next, and the next, and it's been like that all day long ever since we dropped in off the crest, 13,000 foot corniced lip, into that never-never land of high basins above treeline, arctic wasteland warmed and smoothed and tilted up at 20 degrees into a long series of half-open bowls and half-closed gullies, and...  
...look out, man, there's cliffs down there!

Right below us, here, so far from anywhere.  
And there's always a way around: working left in long GS swoopers to avoid the final canyon closeouts; skiing like maniacs beneath big purple cliffs, cut only by awesome avo chutes, one after another, count them, choked with white debris (good thing we weren't here a month earlier!) toward the final choices, the final drops, final couloirs, lefts and rights.  
And down we go, through, into and over the brink...  
...falling between turns, down this last narrow rock-ribbed bowling alley of a snow chute at war with gravity: hit, bite, rebound, aaaaahhhhhh.... and of course we all make it, today of all days, because it's spring, the last enchanted run of an enchanted spring and everything's okay, except that it's all over too soon, but of course, its never really over.



*The ski area is already closed but skiers still find nirvana in Delta Bowl above the town of Telluride*

WHO SKIS WHOM?



*Vail's Back Bowls*

So many seasons  
riding my skis  
round these round  
& perfect arcs,  
always believing  
it was the skier,  
not the skis, leaving  
such pure marks  
on empty snow.  
How could I know  
skis too have reasons  
for the way they move?  
For them too a round  
& perfect turn  
is magic.

In love  
with perfect turns  
I failed to see  
all these years  
my skis  
were skiing me.



*Evening light on the slopes of Madonna di Campiglio, Italy*



*Cross-country skiing beneath Wilson Peak, San Juan mountains, Colorado*

# T H I S I S S K I I N G

This eBook is a slightly modified version of a hardbound book of the same title, published by Western Eye Press,.

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Most of these texts, impressionistic essays, and ski poetry have already appeared as individual pieces on Lito's ski-oriented web site:

[www.BreakthroughOnSkis.com](http://www.BreakthroughOnSkis.com)

but this is the first time they have been collected in one volume.

Lito's wife, partner and true love, photographer, Linde Waidhofer, has been his collaborator through several decades of ski travel and ski journalism, around the world, photographing for many of America's leading ski magazines, such as *Powder*, *Skiing* and *Ski*.

Linde and Lito have skied and photographed from Alaska to Chile, from the Sierra and the Rockies to the Alps, from Japan to New Zealand. Their favorite ski destination is

any new ski mountain that they can ski together.

Nowadays Linde has tempered her passion for ski

photography with a growing involvement in landscape, and wilderness photography, and her photographic support for important conservation projects, especially in Patagonia. Her wilderness images, from across the West, and more recently, from Patagonia can be seen and enjoyed on her web site:

[www.WesternEye.com](http://www.WesternEye.com).

Fine-art archival prints of Linde's favorite ski images are also available. You can order prints of any images in this book by contacting Linde through her web

site.

We are wishing you many more magical days on skis...



*Lito & Linde*



## E N V O I

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